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THE CHARLATAN

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THE CHARLATAN

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE TURRET-ROOM AGAIN.

ISABEL slipped from Dewsbury's supporting arm, and fell on a sofa near at hand. Lottie ran and bent over her, and the rest of the people stared from her to each other with faces of wonder and amazement.

Woodville was the only one among them who showed no emotion. There was neither triumph nor surprise in his face as he walked quickly to a console, where a decanter of water was standing, and, pouring out a glass, offered it to Isabel. Lottie took it from his hand, and held it to her friend's lips.

‘No,’ said Isabel, feebly waving it away. ‘Help me, Lottie—help me to my room.’

The two girls passed out together, and the same astonished silence reigned till broken by Woodville’s voice.

‘Miss Arlington is very naturally moved by what has happened,’ he said. ‘The manifestation was unusually distinct, and Colonel Arlington’s telegram, coming so directly after it—— Well, joy does not kill. The shock will pass. The happiness of knowing that her father is alive will remain.’

The Earl, to whom these remarks were more directly addressed, made no reply. He was as a man who has been stunned by an unexpected blow. Dewsbury, angry and incredulous as ever, certain in his own mind that the whole affair was trickery, had left the room.

‘I am a little tired,’ continued Woodville. ‘This kind of thing,’ he explained, with an air of casual

affability, to the Dean, 'is a little exhausting. If your lordship and your friends will excuse me, I will retire.'

The Earl offered his hand, and seemed for a moment inclined to speak, but said nothing, and Woodville, bowing to the rest of the company, passed out upon the terrace, giving a barely perceptible sign to Madame Obnoskin—a sign she answered with a quick movement of the eyes. He lit a cigarette, and strolled along the terrace in the moonlight, walking up and down for an hour or so before he was disturbed, when the butler, making his rounds with a lighted lantern, accosted him.

'Lord Dewsbury has been asking for you, sir.'

'Indeed,' said Woodville carelessly. 'I shall be in my room presently, and shall be glad to see his lordship.'

The man passed on and Woodville continued his stroll back and forward along the terrace.

The clicking of bolts and the rattling of chains told him that the household were retiring to rest, and presently lights began to twinkle in the upper windows. The castle clock struck twelve, and as the last strokes died out on the air, Woodville heard the French window of the drawing-room cautiously unclosed, and Madame Obnoskin stepped out upon the terrace.

‘Well?’ he asked calmly, flicking the ash from the tip of his cigarette.

‘What an escape!’ she said, with an involuntary shudder. ‘If that telegram had come but one minute earlier!’

‘We should have had to invent some other form of manifestation,’ said Woodville coolly. ‘As it was, it came delightfully *apropos*, and put the finishing touch to our little drama.’

‘I have not your nerves, Woodville; I am trembling yet.’

‘Rather a waste of emotional force,’ said Woodville, ‘to tremble over dangers we have passed and defeated.’

‘You are a wonderful man,’ said Madame, with genuine admiration. ‘After all, it has been a great triumph!’

‘You think so?’ said Woodville. ‘Well, we shall see to-morrow.’

‘But can you doubt it?’ cried madame. ‘The manifestation alone might have been questioned, but borne out, as it was, by the arrival of the telegram, the Earl, I am sure, is finally convinced. He never spoke a word after you left the room, and he has gone to bed dumfounded, like a man walking in his sleep.’

‘And Miss Arlington?’ asked Woodville.

‘I have not seen her; but Lady Lottie told us that, after a brief hysteric fit, she fell asleep, and is now sleeping soundly. But I must not stay here. It

might ruin all if we were seen together like this. Why did you signal me to follow you ?’

‘Merely to warn you,’ said Woodville, ‘that the battle may not be won yet. You are a little excited, my good Evangeline—a little disposed to take victory for granted. Keep your ears and eyes open, and follow my lead.’

‘You surely cannot complain of me so far,’ she said.

‘No ; you have backed me admirably. But don’t let your amiable optimism betray you now that we are on the eve of triumph. *Festina lente* is a good proverb. Don’t make too much of to-night’s success, and don’t run the Earl too hard. He is the only person in the house who is ignorant of your ambition to become Countess of Wanborough ; and if you play your cards too openly, you will ruin both your game and mine. We have convinced nobody but the Earl, and perhaps, Miss Arlington.’

‘I shall be careful,’ said madame. ‘Good-night.’

‘Good-night,’ he answered, and she slipped back into the drawing-room and noiselessly re-fastened the shutters behind her.

Woodville finished his cigarette, and, mounting to his room, drew a chair to the fire, and sat moodily gazing at the glowing coals.

He was sitting thus when the door opened, and Lord Dewsbury entered the room. He was followed by Mervyn Darrell, who carried a lighted bedroom candle.

‘I wish to speak to you,’ said Dewsbury, looking pale and determined. ‘I may not have another opportunity, and, in any case, I could not let the night pass without seeing you and saying what I have to say.’

‘I am at your service,’ answered Woodville coldly. ‘Will you sit down?’

Lord Dewsbury paid no attention to the invitation, but remained standing with his eyes fixed sternly on

Woodville, who continued quietly, addressing Mervyn, who seemed rather anxious as to the result of the interview, 'Won't you sit down, Mr. Darrell?'

'I—I think I will,' replied Mervyn, suiting the action to the word, and taking a seat near the window, still holding the lighted candle in his hand.

'I have come, Mr. Woodville,' said Dewsbury, after a pause, 'to tell you what I think of you.'

'Indeed!' returned Woodville, with a smile and a shrug of the shoulders. 'And you have brought Mr. Darrell with you that he may hear you express your sentiments? Pray proceed. Mr. Darrell, will you have a cigar?'

'I—I really think I will,' said Mervyn, rising and helping himself from the box which the other held carelessly towards him. 'Thank you very much.'

Woodville had assumed his old manner, but it was

clear that he was uneasy under the young lord's steadfast and contemptuous gaze. He lighted a cigar himself, and waited for the diatribe which he knew was coming.

‘Do not imagine for a moment,’ said Dewsbury, ‘that to-night’s performance has in the least degree altered my opinion concerning you ;’ on the contrary, it has simply confirmed my belief that you are a rogue and a charlatan.’

Woodville started, but, controlling himself, knocked the ash from his cigar, and smiled contemptuously.

‘I was unwillingly, as you know, a party to your performance ; but I watched you throughout, and formed my own conclusions as to the trick you were playing. It was clumsy enough, after all ; fit to impose upon children, not upon grown men and women.’

He paused, while Woodville looked at him with the same quiet smile, saying, ‘If this is all you have to

say to me, my lord, it is surely superfluous. I did not imagine for a moment that *you* were converted.'

'Under other circumstances, I might treat such a piece of vulgar folly with the contempt which it deserves, or might laugh at it, as at any other impudent piece of conjuring. But you have exceeded your functions, even as a privileged professor of *legerdemain*. You have played, in a cowardly way, on the feelings of a lady who——'

'Do you mean Miss Arlington?'

'It is of Miss Arlington I am speaking. Her private grief was known to you, and her sorrow for one who is lost to her should have been sacred; but in spite of this, and in defiance of all decency, you have tried to persuade her into a belief that your powers are superhuman, and that you have placed her in communication with her dead father. Such cruelty removes your conduct from the category of ordinary imposition,

and renders it basely criminal. So convinced am I of this, that I should take your punishment into my own hands, if I did not fear by doing so to provoke a public scandal.'

Woodville rose, stood upon the hearthrug, and faced his accuser. He still forced a smile, but it was cold and mechanical, and he could not altogether conceal the dark and malignant passion awakened by the young man's words.

'You are not polite, Lord Dewsbury,' he said, between his set teeth. 'Politeness, I fear, is not your *forte*. Let me warn you that there is a limit to my patience, and, *au reste*, that your personal opinions, of which you are so lavish, do not interest me in the least.'

For a moment Dewsbury seemed about to lose self-control. He made a movement towards Woodville as if to strike him in the face, but Mervyn sprang up and caught him by the arm.

‘My dear Frank, be calm! Mr. Woodville, I am sure, will explain everything to your satisfaction.’

‘Oh, then, there is something to explain, of which his lordship has not yet spoken?’ said Woodville, raising his eyebrows.

‘Only this!’ cried Dewsbury. ‘I wish to hear from your own lips—and I *will* hear—under what circumstances you met Miss Arlington in India.’

‘Pardon me,’ returned Woodville, ‘but these suspicions are unworthy of you. You are putting a question which reflects on the character of a lady whose name is spotless, or should be so in your estimation.’

‘Answer my question!’

‘Kindly speak lower. You will disturb the house, where, I must remind you, you and I are only guests.’

‘My dear Dewsbury!—My dear Mr. Woodville!’ cried Mervyn, looking from one to the other.

‘I ask you again,’ said Dewsbury, ‘what is the secret of your influence over Miss Arlington? It is to be referred back in some way to your former acquaintanceship in India. I demand to know the true nature of your relations there.’

‘The true nature of our relations?’ repeated Woodville, with a significant smile.

‘Yes.’

‘If you desire any information, why not consult Miss Arlington herself? I shall tell you nothing.’

‘You cur!’ cried Dewsbury, turning livid.

‘Dewsbury—Dewsbury!’ implored Mervyn.

‘Since you are Lord Dewsbury’s friend,’ said Woodville quietly, ‘advise him not to go too far. I might imitate his charming example, and lose my temper.’

‘But, my dear Woodville,’ murmured Mervyn, ‘you cast a slur upon Miss Arlington’s reputation.’

‘It is not I who cast a slur upon the lady; it is

the man who introduced her name into this discussion. I regret that Miss Arlington has such a champion. Lord Dewsbury, you have been frank with me, and I shall return the compliment. If I am a trickster, what are *you*? A coward, who, mad with his mean suspicions, gratuitously insults the woman he is supposed to love. A man who loves a woman has faith in her honour. You have none!’

In spite of his anger, Dewsbury winced under this home-thrust.

‘I do not accuse *her*, but *you*!’ he cried.

‘You couple our names together. You imply that there is a secret understanding between us.’

‘I am convinced of it. Do you deny it? Answer me, or——’

‘I think, if you ask me, that you are unreasonably jealous,’ said Woodville, with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders. ‘But you may make your mind

easy. *I* respect Miss Arlington, if *you* do not, and I leave this house to-morrow, never to return.'

'Is that the truth?'

'Yes.'

'You leave this house to-morrow?'

Woodville nodded.

'You will not seek out Miss Arlington, on any pretext, before you go?'

Woodville hesitated, then replied very quietly:

'I will not seek out Miss Arlington, on any pretext, before I go.'

'That you promise?'

'Oh! My promise surely is worth nothing?' returned Woodville. 'But such as it is, I give it.'

'Very well. See that you keep your word.'

'Now, my dear Dewsbury,' said Mervyn, 'let me entreat you to go to bed. You've been exciting yourself unnecessarily.'

Dewsbury walked to the door, and, turning on the

threshold, gazed sternly at Woodville, who listened to him with well-assumed indifference.

‘I warn you,’ he said, ‘that if we ever meet again, I shall feel it my duty to denounce you as a cheat and a rogue. You will be wise, I think, to quit England, and to return to your old haunts, where roguery is more in fashion. Remember, I have warned you!’ And so saying, he left the room.

For a moment Woodville, losing his self-command, seemed about to spring after him or to call him back, but, controlling himself with a fierce laugh, he simply shrugged his shoulders, and continued to smoke his cigar. Then his eye fell on Mervyn, who stood looking at him with a most forlorn expression, and he motioned him to the door.

‘Good-night, Mr. Darrell. You had better follow your friend.’

But the apostle of culture, still holding his bedroom-candle, lingered apologetically.

‘I am so sorry, my dear Woodville, that this has occurred. Let me beg you to dismiss it from your mind. Dewsbury is upset, and doesn’t mean half he says. For myself, I wish to assure you of my profound respect.’

Again Woodville motioned to the door, but Mervyn had not finished.

‘Between beings of advanced intelligence there should always be confidence. You know I am at heart a Theosophist, but am I right in assuming that there was in to-night’s manifestation just a spice of what the vulgar call Humbug?’

Angry as he was, Woodville could not repress a smile.

‘What the vulgar call Humbug! My dear sir, there is humbug everywhere—even in Nature.’

‘True,’ said Mervyn. ‘Nature is, of all things, the most unnatural. You admit, then——’

‘Wise men never make admissions.’

‘ Ah, well, I have no right to ask you,’ said Mervyn, walking slowly to the door; then, pausing for a moment, he added, ‘ I have always had the greatest respect for impostors. They are the men of genius, who perceive by instinct the utter absurdity of human existence. They only do on a small scale what the spirit of the Universe does on a large scale—conceal the sublimely hideous reality with the amusing mask of Idealism. Hem ! Good-night !’

He smiled fatuously, nodded, and left the room, closing the door softly after him.

Left alone, Woodville threw himself on the settee before the fire, and remained for a long time in gloomy meditation. At last he rose, and began walking slowly up and down the chamber.

‘ So I am a rogue, a charlatan !’ he muttered to himself, with a low bitter laugh. ‘ Yes. He is right. *I am* a rogue and a charlatan, but he shall see which hand is the stronger, his or mine. I have done with

all scruples now! My will against her will, my strength against his strength. She shall never be his wife!

He drew back the curtains with an angry gesture, and a brilliant flood of moonlight poured into the chamber, suffusing him from head to foot, and casting his black shadow on the floor of the room. Outside on the battlement it was almost as light as dawn. High in the cloudless sky above the moon swung like a great electric lamp, surrounded on every side with palpitating stars.

‘She is sleeping!’ he murmured, gazing out. ‘If my will has conquered, she dreams of me! I have bent her pride like a reed, answered her innermost yearning, sown in her consciousness the one thought paramount—that our lives are eternally blent together. They are—they *must* be! If there is any of the old power left within me, she must feel it now!’

Leaning against the window, and watching the

silent skies, he was thinking it all over. His mind wandered back to the hour of their first meeting, when they had been drawn together as if by some magnetic spell, and when all that was good and noble in his nature had seemed to awaken suddenly, under the divining rod of her sweet sympathy. She had loved him then, he was sure of that ; but afterwards ? Scandal and calumny had done their work, and she had begun to fear him and shrink away from him, and at last, to his despair, she had told him that she was coming to England, and that they must never meet again. All his passionate nature had revolted against a change that looked like treachery. He had thought her an ideal woman, but he had found her of the world, worldly, like all the rest. Nevertheless, he had been drawn after her, haunted as he came by her loveliness, and at last he had found her again, to discover—as he thought—that he had been utterly forgotten.

‘Yes,’ he thought, ‘they are all alike, and the man is a fool who stakes his life upon the faith of any one of them. A woman is like a dog, and a man, to hold her safe, must be her master.’

Well, he had conquered her at last, but he had not forgotten her scorn of him, her hauteur, the contempt she had shown in every look and word. As he stood thus reviewing the past, he fed his wrath with the memory of the slights she had put upon him, and the passion he still felt for her grew into a cruel and deadly desire. To have her wholly in his power, to possess her in all her beauty, to humiliate her to his caprice, to tear her away from the man who had heaped endless insults upon him, would surely be a fair revenge! He justified the evil thought within him by his belief in the worthlessness, the stupidity, of women generally, mere bundles of nerves, changeful, chameleonic, changing with every wind that blew.

‘Had she trusted me; had she believed in me,’ he thought; ‘had she realized the truth—that, whatever I was to the world, I was loyal to her, it would have been different. It was in her power to save or damn me. She has chosen to do the last! It is not my fault, but hers, that I am what I am—that I have woven around her, and around myself, this network of miserable lies. It was war between us—*guerre à outrance*—and I had to take the weapons nearest to my hand.’

Shut in the gloomy room, he seemed to stifle and pant for air. He walked to the door, and looked out into the corridor: all there was dark and still. Opposite to him, across the corridor, was the door which led upon the old battlement.

He drew the bolt, and passed out into the open moonlight.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SONNAMBULIST.

STANDING there on the battlement, suspended, as it were, between earth and heaven, his eyes took in the wonderful beauty of the midnight scene : the heaven sown thick with stars and quick with celestial phosphorescence, the luminous white moon in the midst suffusing the air with quick electric rays, the dim and distant prospect of the park with its great patches of moonlight and its black shadows of woodland, the faint blue stream of light on the edges of the far-off trees.

The wind had fallen ; there was not a sound save that deep stir which is ‘less sound than silence

audible,' and seems like the still breathing of the sleeping earth, yet the heavens seemed alive to their inmost depths, quickening and kindling ever and anon as a shooting-star fell and was lost in darkness.

He leant over the battlement, looking down, and he could just catch a glimpse of the façade of the mansion and the broad stone terrace which surrounded it. For some minutes he remained thus; then the temptation became irresistible, and he began, slowly and cautiously, to descend the steps leading from the battlement to the lower terrace.

It was with no set purpose that he did this; he was drawn, rather, by some irresistible fascination, to see whether there was a light in Isabel's room, and to discover by that token whether she was awake or sleeping.

But before he reached the terrace, he remembered the promise he had made to Lord Dewsbury—not to

seek out Miss Arlington, under any pretext, before he went away. He paused, thinking to himself, 'Although I am a rogue and a charlatan, he shall not reproach me with having broken my word;' but as he did so, and prepared to retrace his steps, he was startled by the gleam of something white on the terrace beneath him.

Standing moveless on the terrace, looking upward, was the figure of a woman.

He knew in a moment that it was Isabel.

The moonlight fell full upon her, making the white dress that she wore look like marble—and like a marble statue indeed she seemed, as silent and as still.

Quick as thought he crept down the steps and approached her, till he was near enough to see her face; then, hanging in the shadow of the turret, watching her intently, and seeing that her eyes were half closed, he realized that she was fast asleep.

Her face was turned towards the turret, while she stood with outstretched hands, as if listening. Her dark hair was undone, and fell over her shoulders and down to her waist. All that she wore was a night-dress of some white material, which reached to her naked feet.

As he watched her, she sighed deeply, and murmured something to herself. Then, with hands still outreaching, as if to feel her way, she moved slowly away from him, along the terrace.

‘Isabel!’ he whispered.

She paused a moment, listening, and then came slowly back.

As she did so, he quietly retreated before her, ascending the steps which led to the battlement. Pausing above her, he whispered her name again, and again she listened.

Quickly and silently he reached the battlement, and, gazing down, saw her ascending from step to

step, now pausing, now stealing silently on, more like a spirit than a living thing.

Quite heedless now of what might happen, possessed by a certainty of her complete subjection to his will, he crept through the door communicating with the corridor, and waited while the sleeping girl appeared in the full moonlight on the battlement, and stood there as if waiting some further command.

A cold wind stirred the white drapery around her, and she seemed to shiver through and through, but she gave no sign of awakening.

He opened the door of the turret chamber, entered, and blew out the candles burning on the mantelpiece, leaving the room in darkness, save for the dim red light cast by the fire smouldering on the hearth. Then, drawing back into the shadow, and stretching out his hand with a gesture of command, he beckoned to her, and though her eyes were closed she seemed to see and obey.

She flitted through the door beyond the passage, crossed the corridor, and entered the turret chamber.

Pausing just within the threshold, she shivered again, and uttered a deep sigh ; then quietly and noiselessly she stole towards the hearth, and, kneeling down, began to warm her hands at the fire.

He watched her breathlessly.

Although she was pale as death, she had never looked so beautiful, and his heart throbbed with smothered passion through all its pulses.

She was *there*, she was *his*, if he dared to do what his mind imagined. He thought of her scorn of him, her falsehood (as he thought it) towards him, and of his oath that she should never become the wife of Dewsbury ; and then, creeping from the room on tiptoe, he closed the door leading to the battlement. returned to the room, closed *that* door, and turned the key in the lock.

The sound startled her, and she looked round

trembling. He stood with his back to the door, steadfastly regarding her.

The fire flickered up, and illumined her as she knelt from head to feet. She murmured something to herself, and smiled.

Trembling like a leaf, afraid of her, afraid of himself, yet mastered by a wild desire to seize her in his arms, he approached her. Her face was turned again to the fire, and she began singing to herself in a low, soft voice; and though the words were inaudible, the song was the one she had sung on the day of their re-meeting—the strange wild chant of Rubinstein, with its haunting spell.

Did she realize where she was? Did she understand that the man she scorned and dreaded stood so near to her, that they were alone together, while all the household was plunged in sleep? If so, why did she seem so quiet, so self-possessed? Her manner showed no dread whatever; it was rather the manner

of a girl peacefully singing to herself in the solitude of her own chamber.

She seemed another creature to the proud, passionate girl he had known hitherto ; for she was gentle, subdued, and almost happy.

It was very strange, even to him, the Theosophist, the man who professed to know so much of Nature, of the powers above Nature, and of the human heart. He could understand that his will was controlling hers, that she had come there under the spell of a hypnotic trance. What amazed and troubled him, what was unusual in his experience of the phenomena of hypnotism, was the supreme happiness and peacefulness of her demeanour. Only when some unexpected sound startled her, as when he had turned the key of the door, did she show the slightest sign of nervous fear, and even then the emotion seemed less one of fear than of trembling, listening expectation.

One thing was clear, that she was completely mesmerized.

To test this, Woodville willed silently that she should cease singing. In a few moments she became silent, the low, monotonous chant growing fainter and fainter, till it died away.

Still with his eyes fixed upon her, he breathed her name :

‘ Isabel !’

Quick as thought she turned her face towards him with an eager smile, and answered :

‘ Yes, Philip !’

‘ Philip !’ Never before, in the course of all their meetings, not even in India, when natural sympathy and attraction had first drawn them together, and he had dreamed of winning her love, had she called him by that name ; yet it came now from her lips quite naturally, as if she had never called him by any other. As she uttered it her face lighted up with

girlish pleasure, and the tone was so quick and clear that it was difficult to realize that she was still asleep.

Woodville was startled—startled almost as much by the tone as by the word. Aware of his evil command over her, he had expected to find himself face to face with a helpless, will-less woman, spell-bound beyond the power of resistance, physical or moral—a woman who, in her waking moments, felt for him nothing but distrust and even dread, and who, even when hypnotized and powerless to resist him, would be conscious only of a dull, numb sense of pain.

How different was the reality! Had he been her dearest and nearest friend, instead of her most dangerous enemy, the sound of his voice could not have awakened in her a more subtle sense of pleasure.

She kept her face turned towards him for some moments, then, as he remained silent, the light on her features gradually died away.

At last he spoke again :

‘ Isabel !’

Again the sweet responsive cry :

‘ Yes, Philip ?’

‘ Can you see me ?’

‘ No, Philip,’ she answered softly ; ‘ but I hear your voice.’

The answer came slowly from her lips, with a pause between each word.

‘ Open your eyes !’

She obeyed him instantly, but the large beautiful eyes were quite blank, and seemed to see no more than when they had been closed.

‘ Do you know where you are ?’

She hesitated for a moment, as if gathering her thoughts together, and then replied in the same sweet, monotonous tone :

‘ Yes, I am here with *you*.’

‘ What room is this ?’

‘ The turret-room.’

‘Why did you come here?’

She hesitated again, and then answered:

‘You called me, Philip, and I came.’

Again the name, spoken softly as if the word were a caress. No wonder the evil spirit in the man was troubled and disarmed. As she knelt there in her white dress, pure and spotless as herself, her gentle face turned to his, her long hair flowing over her shoulders, she looked more like an innocent child than like a woman. Like Porphyro in the chamber of Agnes, Woodville

‘——— grew faint;

She knelt, so fair a thing, so pure from mortal taint!’

His eyes softened, a mist seemed to arise between him and her, and when he spoke again his voice was faint and broken.

‘Are you not afraid?’ he asked. ‘Remember where you are—alone with *me*!—and answer me truthfully, are you not afraid?’

‘I am not afraid,’ she answered.

‘Rise up,’ he said, approaching close to her, and looking steadfastly into her face ; then, as she obeyed him and stood erect without a shadow of fear, her dark eyes gazing into his, he placed his arm round her waist and drew her towards him. A tremor ran through her frame, but she made no resistance, and her head sank upon his shoulder, while her eyes closed peacefully.

He had hoped and prayed for this ; he had resolved with all his soul and all his strength, by fair means or foul, to hold her in his arms, to become master of her fate, and so to make her atone for all her scorn for him, but now that his thought was realized, he could hardly believe it true. Her breath was upon his cheek, his lips were close to hers, her soft and yielding form was clasped in his embrace, and yet, in the very moment of his triumph he felt guilty and ashamed.

‘Isabel!’ he whispered.

‘Yes, Philip?’ she answered, opening her eyes with a restful smile.

‘Are you sure, quite sure, that you do not fear me?’

‘No, Philip.’

‘Nor hate me?’

‘No, Philip.’

‘In God’s name, why?’

She drew closer to him, nestling like a child upon his breast, as she replied :

‘Because I *love* you, Philip!’

‘You love me? *Me?*’ he cried, while once more the mist came between them, and he could not see her face.

‘Yes, Philip!’

‘Answer me truly. Did you not once *hate* me?’

Again the soft, still, monotonous reply :

‘I never hated you.’

‘Nor feared me?’

‘I never feared you, Philip,’ she answered, and added, trembling softly in his embrace, ‘I feared *myself*!’

‘What did you fear? Answer me truthfully, I command you.’

‘I feared my own love for you, Philip. I did not know you. I thought you were false and cruel, but now that you have been so kind to me, now that you have brought my father back to me, I know that you are good, that there is no one like you in all the world!’

As Woodville listened, his emotion mastered him, his voice broke, his eyes were full of tears, and he trembled as if about to fall.

Conscious of his trouble, the girl reached up her little hand, and just touching his eyelids with her finger-tips, murmured softly :

‘Why are you crying, Philip?’

‘I am not crying,’ he answered, choking down a sob.

It was the supreme moment of his life. Never before had he been so deeply moved, never before had he thought himself capable of such deep feeling.

The girl’s perfect trust and utter surrender, her complete unconsciousness of any evil, her helplessness, her divine gentleness and affection, stirred his very soul to pity.

Often had he dreamed of love, but never of a love like this. It seemed so strange, so unaccountable, that he could scarcely believe it to be real. Yet, for the moment, as always happens in moments of great insight, his own nature became exalted, the passion within him transformed and purified.

As he stood thus, looking sadly down upon her,

and supporting her gently in his arm, a shiver ran through her frame.

‘How cold it is!’ she murmured.

‘Sit here,’ he said, placing her in the settee before the fire.

CHAPTER XV.

‘THE WHITE GAZELLE.’

SEEING that she still shivered, Woodville took a large travelling cloak, which was lying on a chair close to the curtained bed, and raising her gently, wrapped it around her. Then he placed her softly on the settee, settling her head back against a pillow, and said to her: ‘Close your eyes, and sleep!’

She obeyed him, smiling like a happy child, and soon her slow regular breathing showed that she was slumbering profoundly, quite unconscious of his presence.

He stood gazing at her, touched to the soul by her helplessness and her beauty; then, with a deep sigh,

almost a sob, he walked to the window and gazed out into the night.

And now, for the first time in his life, this man, who had believed in nothing, who had been trained to despise all human creatures and regard them as his dupes, who had regarded all religion as vulgar superstition, and all morality as only a cloak for ignorance or hypocrisy, felt ashamed and degraded by his own unbelief. He had spoken truly, however, when he had said that his passion for Isabel would save or damn him ; and he asked himself now, was he to be saved or damned ? He had prayed, as far as he was capable of prayer, to be revenged on the proud girl for the scorn and insult he had suffered from her. He had sworn, if the opportunity ever came, to drag her down to the level of his own baser nature, and to do this at any risk of dishonour to her and of danger to himself. Well, God had answered his prayer by granting it to the full. The opportunity

he sought had come. As helpless as a lamb, spell-bound, sleeping, yet obedient to his slightest wish or will, she was there utterly at his mercy, absolutely and helplessly in his power.

In the story of the White Gazelle, with which he had startled Madame Obnoskin, he had told the tale of himself and Isabel Arlington, and its truth as a parable was now complete. The long and weary chase had ended, the peaks that seemed inaccessible had been reached; his toils, his pains, his doubts, were all over, and the beautiful thing he had sought so long was his at last. It was for him now—for him only—to decide whether it should be destroyed or spared.

Philip Woodville was no sentimentalist. He had been taught, indeed, to despise all deep feeling, both in himself and others. Moreover, he was a man of strong passions, and his passion for Isabel Arlington had been overpowering since the hour of their

first meeting. But, at the same time, he was no coward. He loved fighting, he loved victory, but he was incapable of taking a mean advantage of an enemy when weak or fallen. He had, in a word, the qualities of his defects.

It would be false to say that he was not tempted, that the evil spirit in him did not struggle for the mastery, as he stood there debating in his own mind what to do. Had the girl been merely helpless under hypnotism, had her surrender to him been merely physical and involuntary, her beauty, which had never seemed so winsome as it seemed that night, might have been her destruction. But what he had seen and heard, what had shone like light in her eyes, and sounded like music in her voice, was a miracle—a revelation.

‘*I love you, Philip,*’ she had said.

Then all her coldness had been a mask, all her pride unreal. Instead of hating and fearing him as

he had thought, she had feared only her own love for a man she believed unworthy. From first to last, if her own words were true, she had loved him and him only.

Thinking it all over, realizing how he had plotted to subject her to his influence ; knowing, also, that he was even more base and degraded than she had yet guessed, could he blame her for having worn the mask so long ? No ; his own conscience told him that she had been right and that he was infamous.

Yet the shame he felt was not unmixed with exultation. Whatever happened now, he had triumphed ; he had won the sole thing he had thought precious in the world, this pure girl's love. It was for him to decide of what nature his triumph should be, that of the brutes of the field, or that of a man with a living soul.

He gazed across the room to the spot where she was still slumbering peacefully.

‘Poor child, poor child!’ he murmured. And with that cry of pity, of benediction, came the thought which is born of insight, and he resolved to prove himself worthy of such love.

Up to this moment, strangely enough, he had been so absorbed in the conflict of his own good and evil passions as scarcely to realize the position in which she, an innocent and honourable girl, was already placed. The truth now flashed upon him. If her presence there became known, if any living soul knew or suspected that she had visited him in his room at dead of night, how could he shield her from disgrace? Who would believe that she was pure and innocent, if they found her *there*?

‘My God, my God!’ he cried to himself in despair. ‘What have I done?’

He looked at his watch; it was half-past one o’clock.

He walked on tiptoe to the door, gazed along the

dark corridor, and listened intently. All was perfectly still.

So far everything was safe, and Isabel had not been missed. He knew, however, that Lady Carlotta occupied a room quite close to hers, and at any moment might discover that she had left her bed. If discovery was to be avoided, there was no time to be lost.

He bent over the sleeping girl, and whispered her name again :

‘ Isabel.’

She stirred, sighed heavily, but scarcely seemed to hear.

‘ Isabel ! Isabel !’ he whispered. ‘ Listen, I command you !’

Her eyes opened, and she looked up at him ; but he saw that her trance was still unbroken.

‘ You must not remain here. You must go away as you came. Do you understand ? If you should be found here, a stain will rest for ever on your name.’

Her lips trembled, and a faint tremor ran through her frame.

‘Yes, Philip,’ she replied.

‘But before you go—before you awaken, tell me again that you care for me, that you love me!’

‘I love you, Philip!’

‘Then why, loving me as you say, did you become betrothed to another man?’

The beautiful face became troubled, but the answer came clearly and truthfully as before :

‘I was foolish, I thought you beneath me. My religion taught me that what you did was wicked and profane. I yearned to tell you of my love, but I was too proud. I came to England, but I did not forget you. Day after day I thought of you, and every night you were in my dreams.’

‘Are you sleeping or waking now?’

‘I do not know.’

‘Yet you know where you are?’

‘Yes, with you.’

‘Will you do as I desire?’

‘Yes, Philip.’

‘Then you will go at once, quietly, silently. You will return to your room, and when you awaken in the morning you will remember nothing of what you have said to me to-night.’

‘I will try not to remember.’

‘Yes; try to forget also the love you have felt for me, the kindness you have felt for one who is so unworthy. It will pass away from you like a dream; the thought of me, the memory of me, will also pass away. Now; come, give me your hand, and let me guide you back.’

As she rose, trembling, the cloak which he had placed around her fell from her shoulders. He raised it and wrapped it around her; and then, before he realized what he was doing, placed his arm around her and kissed her on the forehead.

The touch of his lips seemed to break the spell. She trembled violently, gazed wildly into his face, and with a cry of wonder and terror awakened.

‘Hush, for God’s sake!’ he whispered.

But she freed herself from his embrace, and, shrinking back, gazed wildly around the room. The cloak fell from her, rustling to her naked feet.

‘What is this? where am I?’ she moaned; then, as if seeing him for the first time, and looking at him in horrified recognition, she cried, ‘Mr. Woodville!’

‘Calm yourself,’ he said. ‘You are quite safe. You were walking in your sleep and——’

With another cry she made a movement to pass him and reach the door, but her strength seemed to fail her, and sinking on her knees with a wild sob, she covered her face with her hands.

‘For God’s sake, Miss Arlington,’ he said, ‘listen to me! You are in no danger, but you must summon

up all your courage, and return as quickly as possible to your own room.'

As she continued to sob loudly, overwhelmed with mingled fear and shame, he made a movement as if to raise her in his arms, but she sprang to her feet with flashing eyes.

'Do not touch me!' she cried. 'You brought me here! Oh, what will they think of me, what will they think of me?'

'No one will ever know,' he answered sadly. 'What has happened to-night shall be a sacred secret between you and me. Do not think that I shall presume upon it. Do not think that I shall ever take advantage of it in word or deed, although I know now—your own lips have told me—that it was your love for me which brought you here.'

'My love for *you*!' she repeated wildly; 'my love for *you*!'

'Yes, Isabel; it is too late now to wear the mask.

I understand now why you were so cruel; but you were right, my child. I am unworthy of your love, even your pity. Before we part for ever, I wish you to understand that clearly. I am at once better and worse than you thought me.’

‘Let me go!’ she cried. ‘I wish to hear nothing—nothing!’

But she did not stir.

‘Only a word, and you will understand,’ he said. ‘I plotted your ruin—that is why I brought you here. That is all. I have lied to you from the beginning. I lied when I pretended to possess supernatural power; I lied when I assumed to be in communication with beings of another world. All my life, all my religion, has only been a lie.’

‘So false, so treacherous!’ she moaned. ‘And what I saw last night——’

‘A lie, an imposture, like all the rest. I *knew* your father lived. I used that knowledge to complete

my power over you, to subdue your living will. Well, you know me now, and that knowledge will save you. You will waste no further thought on me; you will blot my image from your memory; you will forget that I ever lived.'

Amazed and almost stupefied, she gazed at him as if fascinated. He moved towards the door, and reached out his hand as if to open it.

'Come!' he whispered.

She made a movement as if to follow, but suddenly, with a quick terrified gesture, he placed his finger on his lips.

Outside, in the corridor, there was the sound of a footfall and a rustling dress, and the next moment someone knocked softly at the door.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST STRUGGLE.

EVEN in her semi-dazed condition, when all she saw and all she heard seemed part of a terrible dream from which she had been rudely awakened, Isabel realized the peril of her situation, and felt the necessity of escaping from it, if possible, without discovery.

She drew back silently, holding her breath and listening in terror.

The knock was repeated—a little more loudly.

Still motioning Isabel to silence, Woodville placed his ear close to the door, and listened intently.

Again the knock was repeated, and Woodville heard

again the murmur like the rustling of a dress ; then, after a pause, there came the sound of feet retiring along the corridor.

Woodville crept to Isabel, who stood trembling and deadly pale, leaning against the settee.

The fire had now gone out, and the only light in the room was the moonlight streaming in through the window and lighting the dim tapestries on the further wall.

She could not see his face, for the part of the room where they stood was in almost complete darkness.

‘ You must not go yet,’ he whispered. ‘ I am convinced that the person who knocked is still watching.’

‘ Who is it ?’ murmured Isabel.

‘ I think—I am almost certain it is Madame Obnoskin,’ replied Woodville. ‘ I do not think she would betray you ; but you must not, if we can help it, place yourself in the power of that woman.’

He returned to the door and listened again. All was silent, and he was about to turn the key stealthily in the lock, when there was a creaking sound, as of someone moving along the corridor.

‘I was right,’ he whispered. ‘She is there!’

For a moment his impulse was to throw the door open and boldly face the spy, whoever she might be, but he thought of the trembling girl whom he wished to save, and realized the risk of taking any confidant. He knew the Obnoskin too well to think she would believe in the truth if he told it to her, or in any gloss of the truth which he might invent. From that night forward she would hold Isabel’s reputation at her mercy, and would use her knowledge, no doubt, without scruple to further her own ends.

There was a possibility, moreover, that the person might not be Obnoskin, after all. In that case, who could it be? Lady Carlotta, if she had discovered Isabel’s absence from her room and followed her,

would never have gone away so silently and stealthily. No, the watcher, who was certainly a woman—for he had clearly heard the rustle of a woman's dress—was either Madame Obnoskin or one of the female servants of the household. In any case, it was imperative that she should remain in ignorance of Isabel's presence there.

Suddenly he remembered the old disused door which the Earl had shown him underneath the tapestry. Escape was possible that way, as it communicated directly with the old battlement and with the flight of stone steps leading down to the terrace.

He crossed the room on tiptoe, raised the tapestry, and revealed the door; then he tried to turn the key, but at first it resisted his efforts; at last, however, when he used both hands and put out all his strength, it turned slowly with a hard, grating sound, and the door swung open.

‘Come!’ he whispered, beckoning eagerly.

Isabel did not stir. All he could see was the faint outline of her white dress in the darkness.

‘For God’s sake, come!’ he repeated.

Trembling and tottering as if about to fall, Isabel stole out of the shadows and moved towards him; then, as she reached the moonlit centre of the chamber, she gave a low, piteous cry, and sank forward on her face, in a dead swoon.

‘Isabel!’ he whispered, kneeling by her and supporting her in his arms.

Moveless and ghastly pale, she lay insensible, like a dead woman in her shroud; but drawing her close to him, he was conscious that she still breathed.

For some minutes he tried to restore her to consciousness, listening eagerly all the time for any sound beyond the corridor. All his efforts were in vain. At last, in sheer despair, he rose to his feet, bent down over her, and lifted her bodily in his arms.

As he did so she stirred, moaned faintly, and clung to him, twining her arms around his neck, as he carried her towards the open door, over which the heavy tapestry had again fallen. He tore the tapestry aside, and bending low with his unconscious burthen (for the doorway was very low) passed out into the moonlight.

Woodville was a man of unusual physical strength. From youth upwards he had hardened his muscles by constant exercise in the open air; so the girl's light form was like a feather in his arms. He crossed the battlement, paused there for a moment to look round and listen, and then ran, rather than walked, down the stone steps leading to the terrace.

The terrace once gained, he paused again, and looked into the girl's face. She was breathing easily now, as if asleep.

Far away in the east, beyond the park trees, there were faint red streaks of daylight, a dark cloud

covered the moon, and a thin, misty rain was beginning to fall. The splendour of the night was over, yielding place to a dull and miserable dawn. The air had suddenly grown very cold.

The heart of Woodville sank within him. As he stood gazing at his unconscious burthen, the chillness of the hour seemed to deepen his own sense of desolation. He almost regretted that he had not, in the supreme moment of his triumph and opportunity, acted differently—that he had not taken Isabel to his heart, and made her his own for ever, despite the world.

But this feeling lasted only for a moment ; it was lost instantly in a nobler feeling of utter sympathy and pity. Struck by the chill breath of the dawn, Isabel shivered in his arms. Her hair, which fell loose round her shoulders, was damp with dew, and the thin white raiment she wore was quite wet.

He hastened quickly along the terrace till he

reached the exterior of the room where he had seen her watching on the night of his first arrival at the castle.

The room was an elegantly-furnished boudoir, communicating with Isabel's bedroom and that of Lady Carlotta. The French windows stood wide open, just as Isabel had left them, no doubt, when she wandered out in her sleep.

He was about to enter the room when he was startled by a cry from within, and he found himself confronted by Lady Carlotta, who stood looking at him in terror. A light dressing-gown was thrown around her, and she held a light in her hand.

‘ Silence, for God’s sake !’ he said in a low voice.

‘ Mr. Woodville !’

‘ Yes,’ he replied, entering the room and placing Isabel in an armchair. ‘ Do not alarm yourself. I found Miss Arlington walking in her sleep. My voice awoke her, and she fainted away.’

‘Isabel—Isabel!’ cried Lottie, kneeling by the unconscious girl. ‘She is wet through! Oh, *where* did you find her?’

‘On the terrace, near to the turret-room,’ answered Woodville.

Their eyes met, and he saw that Lottie did not believe him. Her face was full of a horrified suspicion.

‘Go away!’ she said. ‘Go away, I implore you! Isabel—Isabel!’ And as she clasped Isabel’s hand, and called upon her by her name, Isabel awakened, looked round wildly, and then, seeing Woodville, covered her face with her hands.

‘She is safe now,’ said Woodville, ‘and I will leave her in your care. Be assured, Lady Carlotta, that I shall never speak of what has occurred to-night, and I think that the secret is safe with *you*. Good-night, Lady Carlotta—good-night, Miss Arlington.’

So saying, he left the room.

The moment he had gone, Lottie ran to the windows, closed them, and drew down the blind. It seemed to Woodville as she did so that the light of all the world went out. With a low cry of pain, he passed along the terrace, and returned to the turret-room.

Re-entering the chamber by the opening underneath the tapestry, he locked the door again, and arranged the tapestry over it. There was no moonlight now, and the room was quite dark. He struck a match, lighted a candle, and looked at his watch.

It was nearly three o'clock.

How strangely and rapidly the time had fled ! It seemed that only a few minutes had passed since Isabel and he had stood together there, startled by the mysterious knock. Remembering what had occurred, he unlocked the door leading on to the corridor, and listened. Everything was quite still.

He locked the door again, and began pacing up and down the room.

His first thoughts were of Isabel. He was sure that Lady Carlotta, even if, as he feared, she put the worst construction on what she had seen, would never say or do anything to betray her friend ; and, moreover, unless Isabel herself told her, she would never know what had really taken place. The only danger to be apprehended was from the person who had knocked at the door while Isabel was with him in that room ; but even she, in all possibility, did not know the truth. If the mysterious visitor was, as he believed, Madame Obnoskin, he would be able, he had no doubt, to disarm her suspicions.

So far, then, Isabel's reputation was safe, sorely as his mad selfishness had put it in peril. But what of herself ? What of the physical and mental shock she had sustained that night ? Many a woman with far less cause had lost her reason altogether. The strain

of the hypnotic spell, the horrible awakening, the agony of the situation in which the girl had found herself, the tension of wonder and terror ending in that long and death-like swoon, must have been terrible to one so highly strung; and its after-consequences might be also terrible. As he thought of all this—as he realized it all—Woodville loathed and hated himself, and cursed the day that he was born.

Then he thought of her wonderful gentleness, her words of ineffable love. Under the hypnotic spell her soul had become like a calm, pellucid water, transparent to the very depths; and he had seen his own image there. Under such conditions, he knew well, the spirit does not lie. Isabel had loved him from the first—had loved him even when she most feared and doubted him—had loved him in spite of her conviction that he was utterly unworthy.

‘And now I know, since you have brought my

father back to me, that there is no one like you in all the world !'

Well, he had confessed the shameful fraud ; he had torn off the charlatan's mask. She knew now the extent of the deception he had practised upon her, in order to subdue her to his wish and will. ' So far, so well,' he thought. But, having gone so far in self-surrender, the passion for martyrdom urged him to go further still.

With men like Philip Woodville there is no *via media* between good and evil. He was ready to efface himself for the sake of the woman he had wronged. Would that effacement be complete if he left Wanborough Castle without full confession to all those whom he had deceived ?

Before the night had passed, his mind was fully made up. He would accept his defeat to the full, with all its humiliation. Only in that way could he prove his devotion and his repent-

ance. When that was done he would leave England for ever.

When daybreak came, it found him still awake, pacing the turret-room. The tempest of his struggle had passed away, but his face looked worn and haggard, like the face of an old man. Nevertheless, he was now quite calm. He had achieved the final victory, and had conquered himself.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONFESSION.

‘WELL, Mervyn,’ said Lottie, as the Apostle of the New Culture entered the breakfast-room next morning, ‘how did you sleep?’

‘Profoundly, as I always do,’ said Mervyn.

‘I had a dreadful night,’ said Lottie. ‘I didn’t close my eyes till after daybreak, and then I had the most awful dreams. I suppose *you* don’t dream? You’d be above such weakness, naturally.’

‘No, I dream occasionally; but when I do so, it is of the serene, the elemental!’

‘I don’t believe you have any real feeling at all.’

If you had, you'd have been upset by what happened last night, like the rest of us.'

Mervyn smiled—a languid, tolerating smile.

'My dear Lottie, the New Spirit is never upset. Where is Woodville?'

'He has asked to be excused from breakfast,' said the Earl. 'Isabel too. Her maid tells me she is unwell.'

'No wonder, after what happened last night,' said Lottie. 'The White Lady is nothing compared to Mr. Woodville's spooks. He is going to-day, and I hope he'll pack them up in his portmanteau and take them away with him.'

The Earl coughed sonorously, and looked severely at his daughter, who wisely held her peace.

The meal concluded, Lottie, Mervyn, and Frank strolled out on to the terrace, leaving the Earl and Madame Obnoskin together. The Earl sat silent, plunged in deep thought, and the lady watched

him, silent also, until Woodville entered the room.

‘I am sorry, Mr. Woodville,’ said the old nobleman, speaking in a fashion as reverent as it was courteous, ‘to hear of your indisposition. Cannot I persuade you to take breakfast?’

‘I thank your lordship,’ said Woodville, ‘but I would rather eat nothing yet.’

He was unwontedly pale, and there was something indefinably curious in his manner.

‘I should be glad,’ he continued, ‘if you could afford me a few minutes’ interview. I will not detain you long.’

‘With pleasure,’ said the Earl, ‘if madame will excuse us.’

Madame assented with a smiling bow, though she kept her eyes fixed on Woodville’s face, and, afterwards on his retreating figure, with a look of keen inquiry.

Woodville followed the Earl from the breakfast-room to the study, and, closing the door, took his stand upon the hearthrug at a little distance from the armchair in which the old gentleman sat down with a sigh of weariness.

‘I am not very well this morning, Mr. Woodville,’ he said. ‘The events of last night dwelt so strongly on my mind that I have scarcely slept since, and a sleepless night is a dreadful inconvenience to a man of my years. Well, well,’ he continued, with a sigh and a smile together, ‘the fleshly envelope decays, but the assurance, the strong and full assurance, of the immortality that awaits us makes amends for all.’

Woodville looked down upon him with eyes in which pity and remorse were both so clearly blended that their expression would not have passed unheeded had the old nobleman looked him in the face. He sat looking before him with a strange, wistful smile.

‘I have known it always,’ he murmured, more to himself than to his companion. ‘I have felt, since I could think at all, that it must be so—that there *must* be other cycles of being than that in which we move at present, other worlds to redress the balance of this. How can a man who thinks at all think otherwise, though so many of the world’s greatest *have* thought otherwise, and some think so still? How else could the burden of this existence be borne, if this were all? Life would be too dull and foolish a farce without that hope. Make the hope a certainty, as I feel it now, and the riddle is solved: we have eternity wherein to justify the spiritual Father who, while this life is all He grants to us, seems a crueller tyrant than any that ever reigned on earth.

‘Mr. Woodville,’ he continued, rising after a short interval of silence, during which Woodville watched him with the same remorseful look, and sought for words to frame the thoughts in his mind, ‘the service

you have done me must not pass without reward. Nay,' he went on, as Woodville made a motion to speak; 'hear me out. I know you do not look for personal gain. I should not dream of offering to the teacher who has opened to me the vista of immortal life any merely worldly reward. Such happiness as you have brought to me and to that dear child is not to be bought by money. But you have ambition, if not for yourself, for the religion you teach. I am a wealthy man. Take what you need of my substance; it is freely yours. Take all you need to help you in your holy crusade against ignorance and false science—to spread to other minds the light you have poured on mine. Whatever help I can give, count upon it, be it much or little. I shall hold myself only too fortunate if I can, at any mere pecuniary cost, help in your glorious championship of eternal truth.'

He had spoken most of this address while walking excitedly about the room, but the delivery of the last

few words brought him close to the man he addressed. There was such strange matter readable in Woodville's pale face, that the Earl started as he saw it.

‘Mr. Woodville, are you ill?’

‘No, my lord; I am well in health. When you granted me the honour of this interview, I told you I had something to tell you.’

‘True, true!’ said the Earl. ‘I beg your pardon. I am so excited by what occurred last night, that I seem unable to think of anything else. Won’t you take a seat? Pray go on, Mr. Woodville; I am all attention.’

‘I am afraid, my lord, that the communication I am about to make will be a heavy blow to you. If it were possible to spare you, I would do so; but there is no other course possible than that I have determined to take.’

His lordship looked at him at first with an express

sion of pure surprise, which changed as he proceeded to one of growing agitation.

‘Mr. Woodville, you alarm me. Pray speak plainly; suspense is always painful.’

‘The more plainly the better, my lord. Your suspense and my shame will be over the quicker.’

‘Your shame!’ echoed his lordship.

‘I am here,’ said Woodville, ‘to make a shameful confession. I have deceived you. I am not what you believe me; I possess nothing of the power or the knowledge I claimed.’

The shock was, for the moment, too much for the old nobleman. He seemed unable to grasp the meaning of the words he listened to. Still with his eyes remorsefully fixed on his face, Woodville proceeded:

‘I have deceived you throughout. I am what Lord Dewsbury proclaimed me to be—a charlatan, an impostor, who has practised on your desire for know-

ledge, on the need of your assurance of immortality. It was to tell you this that I asked for this interview.'

The Earl glared at him like a man distraught, with a face whiter than Woodville's own, struggling to grasp the gist of this amazing self-indictment.

'I must be mad or dreaming!' he murmured, pressing his hand across his eyes with the gesture of a man waking from a narcotic sleep in some strange place.

'Neither, my lord,' said Woodville quietly.

'Then *you* are mad!' cried the Earl, his stunned senses beginning to recover a little from the prodigious shock of Woodville's first words. 'An impostor, a charlatan, a pretender to occult power, after your marvellous manifestation of last night!'

'Imposture, like the rest,' said Woodville. 'I knew that Colonel Arlington was alive. My friends in Thibet have tracked him for months past in all his movements, and have kept me informed!'

‘But the apparition——’

‘Imposture again. An optical delusion—a juggler’s trick.’

The perfect quiet of Woodville’s manner puzzled and amazed the old gentleman beyond description. He started from his chair, and paced the room in a fever-heat of perplexity, with broken exclamations of wonder and surprise. Woodville stood quietly on the spot where he had remained during the entire interview, following him with his eyes.

‘Am I to understand your words in their absolute, literal significance?’ he asked at last.

‘Absolutely and literally,’ rejoined Woodville; ‘I have spoken the truth.’

‘Then, sir,’ said the Earl, ‘you are a villain, a scoundrel—as low and base a scoundrel as ever disgraced humanity!’

Woodville went paler yet, but stood silent, with

only an acquiescent gesture of the hands in answer to the charge.

‘But why—why, in the name of heaven!’ broke out the Earl again—‘why this deception, practised on people who never injured you? What purpose does it serve? What object did you hope to gain?’

‘That,’ said Woodville, ‘is a question I must leave unanswered. If the secret were mine you should know it; but it affects another person, and I cannot in honour reveal it.’

‘In honour!’ said the Earl, with concentrated scorn and amazement mingled in his voice. ‘With one breath you denounce yourself as a rogue, an impostor, and with the next you prate about your honour!’

Woodville answered only by the same dumb gesture.

‘Great heaven!’ cried the Earl, half staggering as the thought struck him. ‘That woman—Madame Obnoskin—must have been in league with you!’

‘She was,’ said Woodville. ‘We were in correspondence before I came here, and so she was able to predict my coming.’

It took the Earl another minute or two of disordered walking about the room to digest this last communication.

‘And now,’ he said, turning upon Woodville, ‘why this confession? You had succeeded in your conspiracy—why do you throw away the results of success?’

‘To explain that fully,’ returned Woodville, ‘would touch on the secret I have spoken of.’

The Earl stared at him in silence for awhile, and then angrily demanded:

‘Well, sir! Have you anything more to tell me? Is there any further villainy or baseness behind all this?’

‘Nothing,’ said Woodville; ‘I have said all I had to say.’

Amazement and anger, quite beyond words to express, set the Earl striding again about the room.

Presently he tugged furiously at the bell. Before the servant had time to answer the call, he tore open the study door, crossed the corridor, and walked into the breakfast-room.

As the Earl left the room with Woodville behind him, Madame Obnoskin watched them with a quick, piercing, sidelong glance. Woodville's manner, so unusual that even she, with her long and close knowledge of him, joined to all her natural keenness of intelligence, could read nothing of its meaning, his guarded speech, and the unwonted pallor of his face, all tended to warn her of some hidden mystery.

‘What can he be going to say to the Earl?’ she asked herself.

They had left the door open behind them in passing

out, and the door of the study, to which they had retired, was just opposite on the other side of the corridor. She strained her ears as she sat, but could catch nothing but the murmur of leaves and the light buzz of insects from the creepers on the terrace. Maddened by curiosity, she rose and stole to the door of the study, listening there intently, but all she could hear was the monotonous hum of one voice—whether Woodville's or the Earl's she could not tell. A light, quick step approaching her along the corridor startled her from her listening place. She assumed a *degagé* air, and strolled back into the breakfast-room as Lottie came in sight.

‘Have you happened to see papa, Madame Obnoskin?’ the latter asked.

‘Yes. He is in the study. I would not disturb him yet, if I may make a suggestion. He is engaged on particular business with Mr. Woodville, who starts for London by an early train, as you know.’

‘All right,’ responded Lottie, ‘it isn’t of much consequence,’ and passed on.

Madame was about to resume her listening when a sudden staccato interjection from Lord Wanborough, so loud as to be clearly audible through the closed door, came to her ears, succeeded by a violent ringing at a bell. Immediately after the door was flung open, and Lord Wanborough issued from the study, crossed the corridor, and entered the breakfast-room. He was in a condition of violent agitation, evidenced by his rapid movement and abrupt exclamation.

‘Atrocious abuse of my hospitality! Heartless deception! Charlatan! Impostor! Blackguard!’ he muttered, as he strode about the room, unwitting of madame’s presence there.

A moment later, Woodville made his appearance. He was deadly pale, and his expression might have been that of a man walking resolutely to the gallows.

‘You deserve no consideration at my hands,’ said the Earl, turning upon him with scorn and anger in his voice, ‘and you shall receive none. Send Lord Dewsbury here to me at once!’ he said to the servant who had answered his loud summons on the study bell.

‘He is here, my lord,’ answered the man, as Dewsbury entered the room from the terrace.

‘Good! Go!’ said the Earl. ‘Dewsbury,’ he continued, ‘look at this man! You were right concerning him. I have it from his own lips. My God! to think that I should have been cheated; that I should have been miserably duped by such an impostor.’

‘I knew it all along,’ said Dewsbury. ‘I never doubted it for a moment.’

‘Conceive my position,’ continued the Earl. ‘Put yourself in my place, Dewsbury. I must either admit that I have been fooled, or must hold my tongue and

let this scoundrel go unpunished. How Marrables will smile, how the Dean will chuckle, over my infirmity !’

So far, neither of the three had noticed the presence of Madame Obnoskin, who had taken her stand quietly beside the window. The Earl, taking short, sharp strides about the apartment, came suddenly upon her, glared at her in furious silence for a second, and turned away.

‘ My dear friend,’ said madame, in her silkiest voice, ‘ you are agitated. May I ask——’

‘ If you desire any information, madame, ask your confederate for it. Yes, madame, your confederate, for, if *he* is an impostor, *you* must have been in his confidence.’

‘ There is some mistake,’ she began.

‘ There is no mistake, madame, or if there be one, it is *you* who have made it.’

The Obnoskin slipped her mask. She bore down

on Woodville with tight clenched hands and blazing eyes, unrecognisable, in her sudden rage, as the sleek purring creature she had hitherto seemed.

‘What have you said to the Earl?’ she cried hoarsely. ‘I *will* know!’

‘I have simply informed Lord Wanborough of the facts of the case ; that the manifestations he has seen were not genuine, and that I had imposed upon his credulity—that, to use his own words, I was a charlatan, an impostor.’

The Obnoskin’s reception of this utterance seemed, for the moment, strange to all who witnessed it. She went as suddenly calm as she had the moment before become excited, and walking to a little side table, took her seat there, with her feet crossed, and her head resting on her hand in an attitude of calm patience, keeping her glittering eyes fixed on Woodville’s face.

‘May I ask you to leave us, madame?’ said

Dewsbury. 'We wish to speak to Mr. Woodville alone.'

'I shall not leave you,' said madame, speaking very clearly and calmly, without taking her eyes from Woodville's face. 'I shall remain here.'

'In that case,' said Dewsbury, 'we may, I presume, take it for granted that between yourself and Mr. Woodville there are no secrets.'

'None whatever,' returned the Obnoskin. 'None in the world, I assure you.'

'Am I to understand,' Dewsbury asked the Earl, 'that you do me the honour to ask my advice in this affair?'

'Yes,' said the Earl. 'I need advice. My mind seems unhinged by the shock. Nothing on earth but this man's direct confession would have made me believe such baseness possible!'

'My advice,' said Dewsbury, 'is simple, and easily followed. It will be best for all parties concerned to

let this man go, on certain definite conditions. What are your intentions regarding the future, Mr. Woodville ?’

‘ I am about to leave England.’

‘ For what period ?’

‘ For good and all. I shall never return here again.’

‘ Will you give your promise to hold no communication with any member of this household, by any means whatsoever, henceforth ?’

‘ Yes. My written promise, if you care to have it ?’

‘ Your word will do, in this matter,’ said Dewsbury, with a cold scorn, far harder to bear than the Earl’s angry denunciations. ‘ What you have told the Earl, and repeated in my presence, is true ?’

‘ It is true.’

‘ Men of your kind do not act without a motive. May I ask what was the motive which inspired you to make this confession at the last moment ?’

‘A motive,’ replied Woodville, ‘which your lordship will think highly improbable. I thought it my *duty*.’

‘In that one respect,’ said Dawsbury, after a short pause spent in close scrutiny of Woodville’s face, and speaking with great dryness, ‘you have certainly behaved like an honest man.’

‘Thank you,’ said Woodville quietly.

‘You have nothing more to say?’ inquired Dawsbury.

‘Nothing.’

‘Then we need detain you no longer.’

‘A moment longer, if you please,’ said Madame Obnoskin, rising from her seat. ‘I should like to say a few words.’

‘You, madame!’ cried the Earl. ‘We are fully aware of the nature of the conspiracy between you.’

‘Yet,’ said madame, quietly still, ‘in justice to

yourself and to the young lady whom Lord Dewsbury proposes to marry——’

Woodville gave an irrepressible start, and turned his eyes on madame’s face.

‘Leave Miss Arlington’s name out of the question,’ said Lord Dewsbury sharply. ‘She is not concerned in the discussion.’

‘On the contrary,’ said madame, ‘she is very deeply concerned in it. It is on Miss Arlington’s account that Mr. Woodville has rushed into so extraordinary a confession.’

‘For God’s sake,’ cried Woodville, ‘be silent!’

‘I will not be silent!’ she answered. ‘I do not propose to spare *you* or *her*.’

‘What does all this mean?’ asked Dewsbury.

‘Mr. Woodville,’ continued madame, ‘has been candour itself, save on one point, the relations existing between himself and Miss Arlington. When he entered this house it was in pursuit of her. Now

he is leaving, it is because he and Miss Arlington have come to a perfect understanding.'

'Take care what you say,' said Dewsbury, losing somewhat of his habitual self-control. 'If you insinuate that between this man and Miss Arlington——'

'I insinuate nothing,' cried madame, rising with a sounding blow on the table beside her. '*I know!* If you do not believe me, ask him why Miss Arlington visited him alone last night in the turret-chamber!'

'It was she who knocked!' murmured Woodville.

'Is this true?' demanded Dewsbury, turning threateningly on Woodville. 'Does this lady speak the truth? Answer! Deny it!'

'He cannot!' cried madame. 'You see now how candid he has been! I have nothing more to say; my work here is done. Many thanks, my lord, for your hospitality.'

She swept him a curtsey, and with a look of un-

utterable loathing and contempt at Woodville, left the room.

‘My lord,’ cried Woodville, ‘don’t believe that woman! Publish my shame to all the world! Denounce me! Heap what humiliation you will upon me! I will bear it all. But do not believe one word against Miss Arlington!’

‘Did you meet last night, as she declares?’ demanded Dewsbury, in a white heat of passion by this time. ‘Answer me, or——’

‘Take care, my lord, take care!’ cried Woodville, as the young peer came towards him with his hand raised.

‘Dewsbury!’ cried the Earl. ‘For God’s sake, no violence here!’

‘She came to you at midnight, to your room. You were alone there together! Deny it!’

A calm voice, which made them all start and turn, broke on their ears.

‘Do not trouble to deny it, Mr. Woodville. It is true.’

Isabel Arlington came forward, looking very pale and resolute.

‘For God’s sake, Miss Arlington——’ began Woodville.

‘Let me speak!’ she said quietly. ‘Lord Dewsbury has a right to an explanation. I walked last night in my sleep. Awakening, I found myself in Mr. Woodville’s room.’

‘Isabel!’ exclaimed the Earl. ‘What are you saying?’

‘Only the truth. I was there. Then Mr. Woodville told me what he has told you, that he was infamous and unworthy, and that he asked my pardon for the deception he had practised on me.’

‘You were alone, in this man’s room at midnight, in his company?’ said Dewsbury.

‘I was there!’ repeated Isabel. ‘And, being there,

I learned that he was not infamous, but noble ; not unworthy, but capable of sacrificing his name, his honour, his very life, to save me from reproach, and to repair his fault.'

'Is this your only explanation?' asked Dewsbury.

'Yes,' said Isabel; 'it is the only one, and the true one.'

'And you, sir?' continued his lordship, turning to Woodville. 'Have you no better one to offer?'

'Miss Arlington has spoken the truth. I have nothing to add to her statement of the facts.'

'The whole truth?' asked Dewsbury.

'The whole truth,' repeated Woodville.

'And you expect two men of the world to believe it?'

'If you doubt it, Dewsbury, *I* do not,' said the Earl. 'Isabel, my child, I believe every word that you have said. For you, sir,' he continued to Woodville,

‘follow your accomplice, and never let me see your face again.’

Woodville bent his head in silence, and left the room, not daring to direct a glance towards Isabel, who, before his footsteps had ceased to sound in the corridor, fell insensible into her guardian’s arms.

*

CHAPTER XVIII.

‘MR. PHILLIPS.’

WOODVILLE’S first impulse on quitting Wanborough Castle had been to leave England immediately, returning to India *viâ* Paris and Trieste. On arriving in London, however, he remembered that it was necessary to see his bankers, and also to transact some other business for friends in the East—business which he had postponed from time to time, and which would occupy several days.

Instead of returning to the fashionable rooms in Albemarle Street, where he had resided before his expedition into the country, he sought out quarters in the very heart of Soho, saying to himself with a

bitter laugh, ‘Since I am now labelled rogue and vagabond for ever, I had better consort with my kind.’

His chief desire was to escape observation, and especially to avoid the few men whom he knew in the Metropolis. With that view he changed his name for the time being, and was known in the hotel which he had selected for his hiding-place as ‘Mr. Phillips,’ a gentleman on a visit from Bombay.

The place, like the neighbourhood, was dull and gloomy, but it suited his gloomy mood. It was kept by an old Italian who had escaped from the Sardinian mines, and was a favourite resort of all sorts of mysterious foreigners, who gathered every evening to the cheap *table d’hôte*, and filled the air with a confusion of tongues reminiscent of the Tower of Babel.

Of these people, however, Woodville saw little or nothing. He occupied rooms, a sitting-room and a bedroom communicating, on the first-floor, and such

meals as he took in the house were served privately. For this accommodation he paid liberally enough ; so the landlord, though he was puzzled a little by his guest's superior manners and mysterious ways, evinced no curiosity and asked no questions.

The business he had to do occupied him very little, and he had plenty of spare time on his hands between the date of his arrival in London and the date he had fixed for his final departure. So it came to pass that he yielded, as so many weary men have done, to the strange fascination of the great city, and spent many hours after nightfall in lonely wanderings from street to street.

It was a comfort to him in his utter despair and humiliation to feel swallowed up in the great ocean of life, to know no one, and yet to be a part of an ever busy multitude of souls. In the remotest solitude he had never felt so completely alone as he did now, surrounded by men, living shadows of himself, toiling,

striving, suffering, coming they knew not whence, and going they knew not whither.

It was something in his wretchedness to see so many whose wretchedness far exceeded his own—lost waifs of humanity, struggling miserably in the very slough of existence. At that time many a poor creature had cause to bless the liberal hand of Philip Woodville.

It is a truism to say that in self-sacrifice is to be found the highest good, and that virtue is its own reward. Like most truisms, however, it needs a very liberal interpretation. At any rate, it would be absurd to say that this man was happy. He had obeyed his conscience ; he had given up without hesitation everything that he held most precious in the world ; he had put on sackcloth and cast dust and ashes on his head in obedience to the living voice within him.

Après ?

He was an outcast from humanity, or from all he

held precious in humanity, and he had not even to help him—the comfort given to so many of the outcasts around him—some dim belief in a beneficent God, some feeble faith that the sorrows of this world would be mended in a better world to come.

He had never felt any faith, and he was not likely to feel it now. On the contrary, he had been persuaded, since first he began to think, that human life was at best a miserable business. The cry for personal continuance had always seemed to him an infant's cry for the moon—too foolish for serious consideration; and who were those who uttered it? In what respect were the majority of them more worthy of perpetuation than the beasts of the field?

Sometimes, in his mood of bitter scorn for humanity, he felt that only one thing was certain—a horrible and ever-present hell; and as he walked through the streets and alleys, swarming with unclean creatures, full of the wails of broken lives, he seemed

to be wandering through hell indeed. And his soul rose in revolt against the idea of a personal Creator who could boast Himself the author of the world, and yet leave it so foul and incomplete.

There were moments, however, when he was more peaceful and acquiescent, when he forgot the evil in the world, and remembered only the good. These were the moments when he thought of Isabel.

If he was lost, she was saved. His dark shadow had passed away from her life, which thenceforward he prayed might be sunshine. If that was so, he was content, or so he thought. Yet he knew that he would yearn for her presence, grow mad at times with the memory of her beauty, think of her, dream of her, be possessed by her, so long as he walked erect and drew this mortal breath.

Never much interested in the ordinary affairs of the world, Woodville read no newspapers. If he glanced at one, it was only to throw it aside in

contempt for the ignorance and folly it represented. So he missed the advertisement which Mervyn Darrell had inserted in the agony column. Even had he done so, he would not have responded to it in any way, for the Apostle of Culture was the very last person in whom he would have confided at that sorrowful epoch of his life.

During the day he seldom left his rooms. His time was chiefly occupied in writing and in making preparations for his departure. But one night, as he strolled among the dark streets in the neighbourhood of Drury Lane, he was attracted to the theatre, where an enterprising manager was giving a season of German opera. A crowd was entering the doors, he joined it, paid his money, and found a place at the back of the pit.

How he came to enter the building, he could hardly tell, for he was not a playgoer, and he had no curiosity of any kind to see the performance. In view of what

occurred afterwards, it seemed that he was drawn thither by some occult influence. Be that as it may, there he was, seated in shadow under the dress circle, in the midst of the crowd.

The opera was a masterpiece—Wagner’s ‘Der Fliegende Holländer’—a work which, through its very simplicity and power of purpose, represents a great musician at his highest and best. Before the wonderful overture was ended, Woodville was listening like a man bewitched, and when the opera itself began he was spellbound.

Such a theme, treated by a master, seemed a splendid adumbration of Woodville’s own life. The storm of wind and wave, the elemental anarchy, the terror of mystery, were all familiar; he was a waif tossed on the great waters, like the doomed outcast of the story. Then the storm subsided, and out of the depths came, white and dove-like, the form of Signa, the one woman, the *ewigweibliche*, the very soul of

human love. Her first song at the spinning-wheel, her deep emotion when the tumultuous music died away, and in deep awful silence the wayfarer of the ocean first appeared, the gust of passion that drew them together, her dread of him, her attraction to him, the conflict of their living wills, culminating in supreme sympathy and self-abnegation, were all familiar to him, were all things he had known and felt, were a part of his existence. The Flying Dutchman was himself, and the Signa of his salvation was Isabel Arlington.

Never had he been so moved by any production of human genius ; yet there seemed something mysterious and inexplicable in the impression which it made upon him. At last his emotion grew almost too painful to bear. As the curtain fell on the second act, and he sat dazed and wonderstruck amid the applauding audience, he was startled by a voice moaning in his ears, ' Philip, Philip ! ' He rose to his

feet with a startled cry and looked round the crowded house. His eyes fell on a box on the pit tier, close to the stage, and there, with her face turned to the curtain, was Isabel !

His heart leapt within him, and for a moment he seemed to totter and fall. Collecting his faculties, he continued to watch her, fixing his eyes intently on her face. Yes, it was no dream, no fancy ! there she sat, with Lady Carlotta and the Earl.

Suddenly, as if startled, she turned her face from the stage and seemed searching the audience for some familiar face. The place where he stood was in deep shadow, but slowly, involuntarily, her gaze seemed drawn that way. The Earl spoke to her ; she did not answer. The next moment she rose with a terrified look, leant out of the box, and with eyes dilated, and face pale as death, continued to gaze towards him !

Woodville hardly knew what followed. His head swam, and a mist rose before his eyes. When he

looked again, the box was empty, and Isabel was gone.

Eager to know what had happened, he made his way out of the theatre. His progress was slow, owing to the crowd, and it was some minutes before he reached the front of the building. When he did so, he saw a closed carriage driving away, and just caught a glimpse of Isabel's face flashing by in the lamplight; but their eyes met, and he knew that he was recognised.

Was it witchery, or mere accident, that had brought about this meeting? Under what spell had he entered the theatre that night? Was the link between them so strong that it was not yet broken? These were among the questions which he asked himself, in his mad agitation, as he walked along the dismal streets.

There was no rest that night for Woodville. He wandered about for hours like a restless spirit, and then made his way to the gloomy hotel in Soho.

A sleepy boots admitted him. Instead of going upstairs, he strolled into the empty *salle-à-manger*, where a solitary gas-jet was still burning, and ordered the boots to bring him a glass of brandy. While the man was procuring it, he listlessly took up a newspaper—*The Observer* of the previous Sunday. Was it accident again, or some witchcraft, that drew his eyes to the fashionable intelligence, where he read the following words?—

‘The Earl of Wanborough, accompanied by Lady Carlotta Deepdale and Miss Arlington, has arrived at his town mansion in Grosvenor Square.’

Then he had not been dreaming! The night’s experience, which still seemed so fantastic and strange, was a reality, and Isabel was in London.

He drank his brandy, lit a cigar, and went up to his rooms.

Sceptical as he was concerning most occult influences, there was one power in which experience

had taught him faith, and that was the power of hypnotism. He himself had exerted it over Isabel, with extraordinary results ; through it he had subdued her will, and brought her in the trance condition to the turret-tower. Had the slave suddenly become the master ? Was the power which he had used so long against others being at last exerted over himself ?

He sat asking himself that question, and pondering over the events of the night.

So far as he could recollect, he had not even been thinking of Isabel when he was drawn into the theatre. Even during the performance he had been unconscious of any influence but the spell of the musician and the interest of the theme. How, then, account for the voice which he had suddenly heard, for the spell which drew his eyes to the box, and for Isabel's evident consciousness of his presence in the theatre, although it was impossible for her to distinguish

his form or face? Was it all this hypnotism, or some cognate influence, and, if so, were not the cases this time reversed, and he himself the person hypnotized?

Whatever the explanation might be, he was conscious more than ever of some power beyond himself conditioning his life—some power from which he could never escape, and from which, indeed, he would never escape willingly.

Under its influence his passion for the woman he loved rose again to fever-heat. Again he held her in his arms, and looked with mad yearning into her face. Again he remembered her sweet words, her tenderness, her devotion. As he sat in the lonely room, thinking it all over, he heard once more the music of the master-musician, surging up into all the tumult of the tempest, and dying away in all the ecstasies of love; and he, Philip Woodville, was the outcast of the sea, despised by man, rejected by God, but saved, for time and eternity, by the love of a woman!

CHAPTER XIX.

MERVYN IN A NEW CHARACTER.

WITHIN a very few days after Woodville's confession Wanborough Castle was deserted, save by its owner, his daughter, and Isabel. Madame Obnoskin, after a pathetic scene with the Earl, in the course of which she promised faithfully to be silent on the subject of Isabel's visit to the turret-chamber, had vanished into space, taking with her (if the proverbial small bird is to be trusted) a certain solatium in the shape of a little cheque, payable to 'bearer.' Lord Dewsbury had returned to London, leaving behind him a letter, in which he formally renounced all hope of Isabel—not, he explained, because he had ceased to respect and

esteem her, whom he begged to forgive the angry words he had spoken, but because he felt now convinced that she herself was eager to be set free. Mervyn Darrell had gone back to Oxford, where he was busy doing the honours to a certain German Professor, who, having proved by metaphysics the absolute non-existence of a personal God, had followed up his argument by proving that the invention of one by man was a political necessity.

The Earl remained in a sort of moral stupefaction, seeing no one, refusing himself to all comers, even to his old friend the Dean, who constantly left his card. One of his first proceedings, after Woodville's departure, had been to shut up and double-padlock the turret-chamber.

‘For the future,’ he said, ‘the White Lady shall have it to herself. It shall never again be occupied by any human being—certainly not during my lifetime.’

Despite all that had happened, he still clung to a belief in supernaturalism.

‘Every religion,’ he argued, ‘had its impostors, and Theosophy was no more discredited by Philip Woodville and Madame Obnoskin than true Christianity had been by scoundrels like Pope Innocent and Louis XI.’

He turned again with eagerness to his library, and soon forgot his dishallucination in the old enchantment of occult books.

And Isabel?

For a time it seemed as if Woodville’s fears might turn out true, and that her strength would break down utterly under the cruel mental strain. For days she kept her room, seldom speaking a word, and lost in quiet thought; but when Lottie wanted her to see a doctor, she only smiled and shook her head.

‘No doctor can do me any good,’ she said. ‘Be-

sides, I am quite well, and I never felt so peaceful in my life.'

Peaceful, indeed, she seemed—in a dull, listless, dreamy sort of way. Lottie was fairly puzzled.

'She can't be fretting about Frank,' Lottie reflected, 'for I feel sure that she is glad the engagement is broken off. Can she still be thinking of that man? Oh, if I knew what really took place that dreadful night!'

At last, one lovely morning, as the two girls sat together at the open window of the boudoir, Isabel broke the silence which she had kept so long.

'Do you know,' she asked quietly, 'whether Mr. Woodville has left England?'

'No, dear,' answered Lottie; 'I've heard nothing whatever about him, and, frankly, I don't want to. I fervently trust that I shall never see his face again.'

Isabel only smiled.

‘With you it is different, dear,’ she said gently. ‘His coming here meant nothing in your life ; but with me it meant so much ! I have tried very hard to forget him, but you see it is impossible. You remember that night when he brought me here in his arms ? He thought I was asleep, and so, perhaps, I was, but even in sleep one is conscious, and I knew what was happening, and I felt so happy ; and always now, when I close my eyes, I seem to be there still, supported in his arms, and being carried, in a dream as it were, I knew not whither !’

‘Oh, Isabel,’ said Lottie, kneeling by her and looking up in her face ; ‘I understand now ! What a goose I was not to understand before ! You love him !’

‘Yes, Lottie.’

‘Thank heaven he never knew it !’ exclaimed Lottie.

‘He did know it, dear, and it was because he knew it that he went away. I don’t think that we shall

ever meet again in life, but we are nearer to each other now than ever ; and perhaps—perhaps—if there is a hereafter——’

Her eyes filled with tears, and she could say no more.

Two days after this interview Mervyn Darrell, sitting in his rooms at Oxford, received the following message, short and incisive, like its sender :

‘Come here at once.—LOTTIE.’

The Apostle of Culture obeyed the mandate, took the train, and arrived at Wanborough Castle that evening. He found Lottie alone in the drawing-room, looking very pale and troubled, but still preserving her brisk, imperative manner.

‘I’m glad you’ve come,’ she said, giving him the tips of her fingers. ‘Sit down.’

Mervyn smiled and obeyed. She looked at him thoughtfully for some minutes, and then said :

‘Mervyn, have you ever in all your life been of the slightest use to anybody?’

The question was a startling one, but it did not disconcert Mervyn in the least.

‘Never,’ he answered, with his usual superior smile. ‘I have a constitutional objection to useful things and people. A donkey is useful—so, I presume, is a clergyman; but I hope I resemble neither.’

‘Humph!’ muttered Lottie, continuing to regard him thoughtfully.

‘Is anything the matter?’ he inquired, after a pause. ‘In *your* case, Lottie, I might strain a point, and endeavour to be of assistance.’

‘You’d very likely make a bungle of the whole affair,’ returned Lottie; ‘you’re so impossible.’

‘In that case, why did you send for me? Surely not to tell me what I already know!’

‘You were the only person I could think of. I’ve no brothers, and no friends. Papa is in a state of

moral collapse, and Frank has gone back to his politics. Oh, Mervyn,' she added, with a sudden change of manner, 'do be sensible, and help me if you can!'

'My dear Lottie,' said Mervyn, 'I can't promise to be sensible. But tell me what it is you want.'

'A man of the world, a man of tact, a diplomatist. One who will do whatever I tell him, and do it judiciously.'

'Dear me!' exclaimed Mervyn. 'I'm afraid——'

'Don't say you refuse!' cried Lottie, stamping her little foot; 'and don't pretend to be more perfectly imbecile than you are!'

'On my word!' said Mervyn, leaning back in his chair with a yawn and folding his arms behind his head, 'energy suits some people tremendously well. You look awfully nice when you're excited, Lottie!'

‘Oh, Mervyn,’ pleaded the girl, ‘can you be serious just for once?’

‘I hardly know,’ said the young man meditatively. ‘I suppose I might be, under sufficient provocation. I think,’ he added, ‘that I haven’t been really serious since I had that turn-up with the bargee at Iffley.’

‘What was that?’ asked Lottie. ‘A fight? *You* fought somebody, Mervyn?’

‘Thrashed him, too!’

‘Oh!’ cried Lottie, with beaming eyes, ‘how splendid! I love a fighting man! I should have admired you then, Mervyn!’

‘My dear Lottie, I was a most disgusting exhibition! I went about for a fortnight with one eye closed and a nose like a pumpkin!’

‘I shouldn’t have cared for your nose,’ said Lottie. ‘Who ever thinks about a hero’s nose? But now, Mervyn,’ she went on, dropping back to gravity again, ‘let us be serious. Really and truly, I need

your help. I know you're clever, though you do try so hard to hide it, and I believe you have a good heart.'

'Highly flattered, I'm sure,' said Mervyn. 'Well? I'm listening.'

'It's about Isabel,' said Lottie, lowering her voice and looking cautiously round, though she knew they were alone together. 'Mervyn, I don't know what to do; it's terrible! She is getting thinner and paler every day; she doesn't eat as much as one of my canaries; she takes no interest in anything, and wanders about the place like a ghost. Not even the knowledge of her father's return, and the hope of seeing him in a week or two, seems to do her any good. Mervyn,' she continued, laying her hand on her companion's, and speaking brokenly and with wet eyes, 'there are moments when I fear she may not live to see him!'

'Bless my soul!' cried Mervyn, for once startled

out of his affected languor. 'Lottie, my dear child, what are you saying?'

'It's true, Mervyn,' she continued, 'and you would think so too if you saw her.'

'But what use can *I* be here?' asked the young man. 'I'm not a doctor.'

'It's no case for doctors,' said Lottie. 'All the drugs in the what-d'ye-call-it couldn't do the poor darling any good. Listen! Have you seen or heard anything of Mr. Woodville since he left the castle?'

'Nothing,' answered Mervyn, obviously surprised by Lottie's apparent inconsequence.

'You must find him,' said the girl emphatically. 'You must find that man, if he's above ground.'

Mervyn stared at her in silence, with a completely blank visage, for at least thirty seconds; then suddenly started and emitted a long, low whistle. 'By Jove!' he murmured to himself. 'I say, Lottie, you can't mean—confound it!—you can't mean that Isabel—'

‘I mean,’ said Lottie, ‘that she’s in love with him. I mean that she’ll die if he leaves England and they are parted for ever. Yes, yes,’ she cried, answering the expression of Mervyn’s face, ‘I know. I should have said just the same myself a month ago. I should have laughed at anyone who told me that anybody ever died for love. But that is what Isabel is dying of, Mervyn. Her life is bound up in that terrible man. You must find him!’ She rose. ‘I don’t want to hear you say anything,’ she continued, as Mervyn opened his lips. ‘It’s absurd and silly and impossible, and all that, for a girl who might have been a peeress to fall in love with a conjurer, but that’s what happened, and we’ve just got to make the best of it. You must go to London, Mervyn, and find Mr. Woodville. It’s a thousand to one he’s there, for he can’t have sailed for India yet; there has been no ship since he left here. Go, and be of some use for once in your life. Find that

man, or never show your face in Wanborough Castle again.'

The girl's enthusiasm, the novelty of the quest on which she sent him, fired Mervyn with a sudden zeal. As he rose and took her hand there was a look on his face which Lottie had never seen there before, a look which would have surprised his fellow Apostles of the New Spirit more even than it surprised her. He cared vastly more for Lottie than he liked to admit, even to himself, and she looked delightfully winning as she imperiously requisitioned his services in her cousin's cause.

'I'll go,' he said. 'I'll be off by the next train, and if Woodville's above ground I'll find him. By Jove! Lottie, energy isn't such a bad thing, after all, just as an occasional tonic. Do you know, I feel as if another set-to, such as I had with the bargee, would do me good.'

'You're a good fellow, Mervyn,' said the girl, 'when you aren't posing and pretending to be something that

you're not. There, there !' she said, extricating her fingers from his grasp as he bent down to kiss them. 'Don't be silly. Go and find Mr. Woodville, and there will be plenty of time for nonsense afterwards.'

Mervyn drove back to the station just in time to catch the early afternoon train to St. Pancras. Man-hunting is always the most fascinating of pursuits, and the condition of excitement into which he worked himself about Lottie's commission surprised him. As he sat in the train he found two advertisements of Private Inquiry Offices, the chief of each establishment boasting a former connection with Scotland Yard. He took a cab at the station and rattled off to their various addresses, leaving at each a detailed account of Woodville's appearance, and what he knew or could guess of his haunts and habits. Next he drove to a big advertisement agent's in the Strand, and insured the appearance in every leading London daily of the following announcement :

‘Mr. Philip Woodville is urgently desired to communicate at once with M. D., Poste Restante, Oxford.’

Before he went to bed, thoroughly tired out, he had made inquiries at the ‘Travellers’ and Sports’ Clubs, and at many of the hotels most patronized by Anglo-Indian travellers. Next day saw him at the twin-villas rented by the Theosophical Society in Finchley Road, and he scoured London east, west, north and south to inquire for any possible news of the missing man at the private addresses of the devotees of the faith.

But there was nothing to be heard. Woodville’s presence in England was known. His arrival from India and his sojourn at Wanborough Castle had been chronicled in the gossiping prints, in which also had appeared various more or less mutilated accounts of the *séance* ; but Woodville appeared to have held no communication with any person interested in theosophy since his leaving the castle. The detective agencies

drew blank also. No person answering the description given had been remarked at the shipping offices or railway stations, and on the third day of the appearance of Mervyn's advertisements no answer had been received.

It was on the afternoon of that day that Fortune first favoured him in his quest. He was strolling dejectedly along Bond Street, when a lady emerged from a shop, the door of which was held obsequiously open by one of the attendants.

'I thank you, sir,' said the lady.

Mervyn started at the voice, and, turning, found himself face to face with Madame Obnoskin. She answered his gaze with an aspect of such perfect self-possession that no onlooker could have thought for a moment that they had ever met before—so perfect that Mervyn was for a moment staggered by the idea that he had been deceived by a chance resemblance.

She would have passed him, but, uncovering politely, he barred her path.

‘Will you grant me the favour of a word, Madame Obnoskin?’ She made no answer, and he continued : ‘I want particularly to learn the whereabouts of our common friend, Mr. Woodville.’

‘I know nothing of Mr. Woodville or his whereabouts,’ she answered curtly. ‘Have the kindness to stand aside, sir.’

It was perfectly obvious that, whether she spoke the truth or not, Mervyn would get no information from her, and a squabble with a lady in a West-end thoroughfare was neither to his taste nor his interest. He stepped aside with a second salute, and madame entered a neat little one-horse brougham, the door of which was held open by a well-appointed page-boy. It moved away; and Mervyn, after waiting for a second, hailed a hansom, and bade the driver follow it. The brougham stopped at a house in Clarges

Street. Mervyn gave his cabman the word to drive straight on, marked the number of the house in passing, and stopped his vehicle at the further corner of the street, in time, himself unseen, to see madame descend and enter. The shades of evening had fallen pretty thickly by this time, so Mervyn felt secure in keeping in sight of the house. He had been in watching for a half-hour or so, when a servant-maid came up the area-steps and directed her footsteps towards Piccadilly. He followed and accosted her, soothing her initial alarm by the gift of half-a-sovereign and the assurance that all he needed was a little information. The lady he had just seen enter the house was a foreign lady, of the name of Obnoskin. Did she live there? Yes; she had lived there, on the drawing-room floor, for the last two or three days. Did she receive visitors? Yes; two people had called upon her. Was one of them a young, handsome man with a very dark complexion, dark eyes, and black

curly hair? No, the maid said; nobody answering to that description had called. Mervyn let the girl go, she promising to tell no one of his inquiries, and strolled back along the street. Over the fanlight of a house, immediately facing that in which Madame Obnoskin had taken up her quarters, was a card announcing apartments to let. Struck by a sudden inspiration, Mervyn knocked. The rooms to be let were on the second floor in front of the house, and so suited his purpose, which was to dog madame on her every visit to the outward world until he could establish the truth or falsehood of her ignorance of Woodville's hiding-place. He watched from his window till long after midnight, but though many persons left or entered the house opposite, he caught no further glimpse of madame. He was beginning to think further watching useless for that night, when a vehicle drew up at the door, and he recognised it as the carriage in which madame had driven home in the

afternoon. He seized his hat and umbrella, dashed downstairs, and, cautiously keeping in the shadow of the lintel of the front-door, saw madame emerge from the house, give a short direction to the coachman, and enter the vehicle. He walked quickly into Piccadilly, the carriage overtaking him before he gained the corner. He ran behind it noiselessly until he met an empty cab, sprang in and instructed the driver. The brougham rolled rapidly to a little back street in Soho, where madame alighted before a tall narrow-fronted house, and, after knocking and holding a short conference with a servant, was admitted. It was raining heavily, and Mervyn's watch, as he tramped backwards and forwards just out of the range of the windows of the house, was anything but comfortable. Twice the church bells clamorously answered each other overhead, telling the hour, but he stuck to his task with a constancy he felt to be heroic. The third hour was far gone

before the door of the house opened, revealing two people, a woman and a man. He walked rapidly past them, his face hidden by his umbrella, and put all his soul into his ears. Madame's voice, angry and excited, reached him first, speaking in a language of which he had no knowledge; and Philip Woodville's voice, soft and languidly monotonous, answered her petulant phrases.

‘*Tout vient à point à celui qui sait attendre,*’ murmured Mervyn; ‘I have found him at last!’

CHAPTER XX.

INTERCESSION.

MERVYN lingered in the rainy street until Madame Obnoskin, returning to her carriage, was driven away and Woodville had retreated to the house and closed the door behind him. Then, after carefully registering in his mind the number of the house and the name of the street, he betook himself to his hotel, leaving word with the night porter that he was to be called at a sufficiently early hour to enable him to catch the morning train to Wanborough. He apprised Lottie by telegram of the satisfactory conclusion, so far, of his quest, and he was in no measure surprised to find that energetic young lady awaiting him just within

the park gates. He dismissed his fly, and they walked side by side along the avenue, while he recounted to her his experience of the chase after Woodville.

‘You’ve managed very well,’ said Lottie, ‘all things considered.’ She never paid Mervyn an undiluted compliment. ‘But I don’t know, after all, if our trouble will be of much use. Isabel puzzles me dreadfully. This last day or two her manner has changed completely.’

‘How changed?’ asked Mervyn.

‘The day you went to London she came down to dinner in the highest spirits. She has been running all over the place, laughing and singing, gayer than I ever saw her before.’

‘That’s a good symptom, surely,’ said Mervyn; ‘it looks as if she had made up her mind to forget the fellow.’

‘Yes,’ said Lottie, ‘but there are other symptoms

that I don't like nearly so well. She doesn't eat any more than she did when she was moping herself to death. And she doesn't sleep well. I have heard her crying in the night, and when I went to her room to try to comfort her, I found her pretending to be fast asleep. Her gaiety isn't real, and you can't help feeling that she might break down at any moment.'

'What are you going to do in reference to Mr. Woodville?' asked Mervyn, after a pause.

'I don't know yet,' Lottie answered.

'If anything at all is going to be done,' answered Mervyn, 'it should be done quickly. He might leave England at any moment.'

'He mustn't go without our knowledge,' said Lottie. 'If Isabel can cure herself of the infatuation she has for him, well and good, but if she can't——'

She left the remainder of her thought unspoken.

'You must be in touch with him, Mervyn, or at least keep your eye upon him, and be able to com-

municate with him if it should prove necessary.' She mused for a little while. 'I'll tell you what we will do. He knows your handwriting, I suppose.'

'Yes,' said Mervyn. 'We have had some little correspondence together.'

'He doesn't know mine,' said Lottie. 'I shall write him a line telling him not to leave England for another week, and to hold himself in readiness for a summons, and sign it, "A Friend." You can post the letter in London, and tell one of the detectives to keep him in view and report his actions. I think I shall be able to tell finally in a day or two whether Isabel is going to get over this folly or not.'

They reached the house, and found Isabel sitting in the drawing-room alone. She had not noticed their approaching footsteps, and Mervyn had time to observe her. She was sitting in an attitude of fatigue and dejection, with her chin sunk upon her breast, and her eyes bent upon the carpet at her feet.

Her cheeks had a hectic, unhealthy flush, and her eyes, unnaturally large and bright, were ringed by dark circles. Mervyn was shocked at the alteration in her appearance. When she became conscious of their presence, she rose to her feet with a quick, nervous shudder, instantly suppressed, and approached them.

‘ Good news !’ she cried, with a feverish gaiety. ‘ I have persuaded uncle to take us all to London. It is terribly dull here ; one is bored to death.’

‘ I am afraid you won’t find London much better,’ said Mervyn, ‘ the season is over, and there is nothing doing.’

‘ Oh !’ cried Isabel, sitting at the piano and rattling at the keys, ‘ London is never dull. There are always more or less people in town, and there are the theatres, and picture galleries, and lots of things to amuse one. And I like the crowd. I hate solitude. I feel as if I should like to pass the rest of my life

driving about the streets in a swift carriage, looking at the shops and at the people. I want life, movement, excitement! This place stifles me. I've had enough of vegetating.'

Lottie and Mervyn interchanged a quick look of intelligence. Isabel's manner was as unlike her usual style of speech as could be imagined and the new idea of enjoyment she propounded was startlingly distinct from any she had ever spoken of before. She had never cared for the crowded gaieties of London, and had always been happy to leave them for the tranquillity of country life. Her very voice was changed. Its melancholy, musical softness was gone; there was a haggard, defiant ring of forced jollity in it far more painful to hear.

'When do we go?' asked Lottie.

'This afternoon by the 3.10,' answered Isabel. 'Fifine is packing our things; I think I'll go and look after her.'

She flitted off, humming a tune.

‘You see,’ said Lottie to Mervyn, ‘how changed she is.’

Mervyn nodded with a grave face.

‘You had better stay and have lunch with us, and we will all go to London together.’

It was a dull party which travelled that afternoon. Isabel’s mood had changed to a petulant silence, and she sat at the window of the train looking out on the flying landscape without speaking a word to her companions. The Earl was glad to get away from the castle for a time, but had no great expectation of pleasure from the excursion to London.

Isabel’s silence lasted till she was seated in the carriage which they found waiting at the station in readiness to convey them to Grosvenor Square.

‘At last!’ she said, looking out on the bustle of the streets. ‘Now we’re going to enjoy ourselves. Where shall you take us to-night, Mervyn?’

‘I really didn’t know that you would like to go anywhere,’ he replied.

‘Of course I want to go somewhere,’ said Isabel irritably. ‘Do you think I’ve come to London to bury myself alive? What are they doing at the theatres?’

‘Well,’ said Mervyn, consulting the advertisement column of a newspaper, ‘there’s “Olivia” at the Lyceum.’

‘No, I don’t care for the Lyceum,’ said Isabel; ‘it’s too slow. Find something else.’

‘There’s a melodrama at the Princess’s.’

‘That sounds better; but isn’t there anything funny?’

‘Burlesque at the Gaiety,’ said Mervyn.

‘The very thing!’ cried Isabel, clapping her hands. ‘You must go and dress and get a box. I’ve never seen a burlesque.’

‘Had you not better rest to-night, my dear,’ asked Lottie, ‘and begin pleasure-seeking to-morrow?’

‘I don’t want to rest,’ said Isabel; ‘I want to enjoy myself and see everything I can. You must find out anything that is going on, Mervyn, and let us know each morning.’

The Earl looked at her wonderingly. He was not a very keen or observant old gentleman, but Isabel’s change of manner was too marked to escape his attention. To find this reticent and retiring girl out-Lottieing Lottie, in her thirst for frivolous amusement was a curious experience. He put it down to the excitement occasioned by the expected return of her father, and a natural desire to abridge the period of waiting for the earliest news at hand. This burst of feverish pleasure-seeking lasted for two or three days, during which time Mervyn and Lottie were both hard put to it to keep pace with Isabel. It ended with that night at Drury Lane already spoken of, and the girl fell back into the dark, listless, uninterested mood which had frightened her friend aforehand. After

this had lasted for a couple of days, Lottie summoned Mervyn to secret council.

‘Mervyn,’ she asked, ‘is that man still in London?’

‘Yes; my men are watching him. He not only hasn’t gone, but, so far as they can make out, he has no immediate intention of going; at least, he is making no preparation.’

Lottie sat silent for a minute, obviously, from her intent and troubled look, thinking hard.

‘Yes,’ she said aloud, speaking to herself, ‘there might be a way. I suppose,’ she continued, addressing her companion, ‘that you have studied this hypnotic business, and know all about it.’

‘I have read a little about it,’ replied Mervyn, with a great deal more modesty than he usually displayed in claiming acquaintance with a subject. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘I want you to tell me something. Can a person

who has hypnotized another person take off the influence if he chooses to do so ?

‘I should suppose so,’ replied Mervyn, ‘though I really couldn’t say for certain. But I suppose that because you have been subjugated by the power of a certain personality, it does not follow that you need be the lifelong slave of that personality, unless the hypnotic force is constantly renewed by the will of the hypnotizer. He could remove the influence by the mere fact of ceasing to continue it.’

Lottie rose to her feet with a sudden air of determination.

‘I’ll do it !’ she cried, ‘it’s the only way.’

‘Do what ?’ asked Mervyn.

‘I shall go and see Mr. Woodville,’ said Lottie, ‘and make him leave Isabel alone.’

‘What do you mean ?’

‘I mean,’ said Lottie, ‘that I have thought the whole business out and got to the bottom of it. That

man has cast a spell on Isabel ; he has hypnotized her, and he must be made to take his spell off her.'

'My dear Lottie,' cried Mervyn, 'what nonsense are you talking?'

'I'm not talking nonsense at all,' said Lottie ; 'that's *your* province. If you knew all that I know, you would see this matter as I see it.'

For a moment she was on the point of telling him what she had witnessed on that eventful night when Isabel's sleeping feet had borne her to the turret-chamber, but she refrained. That was not her secret, but Isabel's, and Lottie was loyalty incarnate.

'I'll go at once,' said Lottie, 'and you must go with me. We've got time before lunch, and nobody will miss us. Isabel is out, and papa is busy in the study. Ring for a hansom while I get my jacket on. Never mind making any objections ; my mind is made up.'

She left the room, and Mervyn, after some mutterings and pulling at his moustache, ordered the cab, which was announced as Lottie bustled back into the room, completely equipped for out of doors.

‘You had better send up your own name, and say nothing about me,’ said Lottie, breaking silence for the first time as the vehicle entered the street in which Woodville had taken up his quarters. ‘He won’t want to see me.’

They entered the restaurant on the ground-floor of the hotel, where half a dozen groups of swarthy, ear-ringed Continental gentlemen were consuming cigarettes and *petits verres* over their newspapers and dominoes at the little marble-topped tables, and a waiter came forward to inquire their needs.

‘You have a gentleman staying in the house,’ said Mervyn, and described Woodville. The waiter hesitated, shrugged, changed colour a little, and finally,

with a word of excuse, crossed the room to confer with the patron.

‘You know the gentleman’s orders,’ said the latter in Italian. ‘Say there is no such person here.’

‘You may spare yourself the trouble,’ said Mervyn, also in Italian, which language he spoke fluently. ‘I know that he is here. Give him this card, if you please, and say that my business is of the most pressing importance.’

The waiter shrugged again, and glared inquiringly at the landlord.

‘Take the gentleman’s card,’ said the landlord. ‘You will understand, signor, that we but obey the orders of the dark signor in refusing him.’

‘I quite understand. Say nothing about the lady who accompanies me,’ said Mervyn, and returned to Lottie’s side as the waiter vanished with his card. He reappeared a minute or two later, and requested

Mervyn to follow him, which he did, followed in turn by Lottie.

They found Woodville alone in a little sitting-room, furnished more in the Continental than in the English style.

He looked pale and worn, and was markedly thinner than when Lottie had last seen him. He evinced no surprise at her appearance, and not the slightest curiosity as to how his retreat had been discovered.

‘This is an unexpected pleasure, Lady Carlotta,’ he said, as he set a chair for her. ‘You are well, I hope, Mr. Darrell?’

Mervyn, with considerably less aplomb than he ordinarily showed, replied that he was very well indeed.

‘To what, may I ask, do I owe this honour?’

‘I don’t know, Mr. Woodville,’ Lottie began, ‘whether I am quite the right person to intrude on

your privacy, to ask a favour, but that is the object with which I asked Mr. Darrell to bring me here.'

She paused, and Woodville slightly inclined his head in token of attention.

'You may not be particularly anxious to oblige me, but when I tell you that it is on Miss Arlington's account that I have come, perhaps you will listen.'

'I will listen to any communication you may do me the honour to make,' said Woodville. 'None the less willingly,' he added, 'because it is you who make it.'

'What are you doing to Miss Arlington?' asked Lottie, with sudden sharpness of voice and manner.

Woodville looked from her to Mervyn and back again, puzzled by the curious character and manner of the question.

'I beg your pardon, Lady Carlotta; I am afraid that I scarcely understand you.'

'Pardon me, Mr. Woodville,' said Lottie, 'but you

understand me perfectly. This is no time for beating about the bush, and if I am impolite I am very sorry, but I can't help it. Ever since you came to Wanborough Castle Isabel has been a changed being. I had hoped that when you went away the trouble would be over, but instead of that it has become worse and worse. You are killing her, Mr. Woodville! Killing her as certainly as you would kill her if you shot or poisoned her!

Woodville was looking at her with a white scared face.

‘You have established some sort of influence over her, of what kind I don't know, though I suppose it is what you call hypnotism. I have heard you say that you possess that power, and I believe—you will understand what I mean if Mr. Darrell does not—that I have seen you exercise it on Miss Arlington.’

‘I do possess the power,’ said Woodville, ‘and I do not deny—it would be useless to deny it to you—that

I have exercised it on Miss Arlington, but not since I left the castle. I swear to you that what I say is true. I have exercised no control over Miss Arlington's acts or thoughts since then by any voluntary movement of my will. I hope, I am sure, that your fears for your friend are exaggerated.'

'And I am sure that they are not,' replied Lottie; 'she is fretting herself into her grave,' she went on, rising, with the tears running down her face. 'I have said all I have to say, sir. If you are practising those wicked arts on Isabel you are a murderer, and her death will lie at your door. Come, Mervyn!'

She left the room, and Woodville turned his white face on Mervyn, with a wild question in his eyes.

'Lady Carlotta,' said the latter, answering the dumb question thus addressed to him, 'has said nothing more than the truth about Miss Arlington's condition. It is a very grave business, Mr. Woodville. It was I who introduced you to the castle, and

the responsibility rests partly upon me. Can nothing be done ?’

Woodville sank trembling into a chair, staring straight before him. ‘My God !’ he murmured in a voice so low that it scarcely reached Mervyn’s ears.

‘Can you suggest nothing?’ asked Mervyn again. ‘If you have done the evil, is it beyond your power to cure it?’

‘For God’s sake,’ said Woodville, ‘leave me to myself awhile; let me think in peace. Yes,’ he cried, rising from his seat and gripping Mervyn’s hand; ‘it shall be cured, though it costs me my life.’

CHAPTER XXI.

FASCINATION.

As the reader already knows, Woodville had been visited, shortly after his arrival in the hotel in Soho, by Madame Obnoskin. He himself had written to her, under care of a certain Theosophical Society, of which they were both members, requesting an interview, and telling her his reasons for remaining incognito during the short period that he remained in London.

She had come to him at once, still furious at the failure of her designs on the Earl of Wanborough, and at her ignominious expulsion from the castle. In no measured terms, but with all the spitefulness

of an angry woman, she had reproached him for his treachery to herself and to what she called 'the cause.'

He had listened to her quietly, with an air of ineffable weariness, until the moment when, trembling with passion, she touched again upon his relations with Isabel.

'Stop there, if you please!' he said, with a terrible look. 'Neither of us is fit to breathe that lady's name. Think what you like of me, denounce and insult me in whatever way you please, but be silent concerning Miss Arlington — for your own sake be silent.'

'Why should I spare her?' cried the Obnoskin; 'neither she nor you have spared me. I have been degraded, insulted, ruined, and you are the cause.'

'You have escaped very lightly, my dear Obnoskin,' said Woodville, with a touch of his old sarcastic manner. 'For less than you and I have done many

an unfortunate thaumaturgist has stood in the felon's dock. I should be sorry to see so charming a lady there,' he added, smiling darkly ; ' but stranger things have happened.'

' I shouldn't care,' she exclaimed fiercely, ' if I had taken my revenge !'

' Oh yes, you would care—a prison dress would not become you, and you, who are so fond of luxury, would object to the prison fare. You are safe now, my dear Obnoskin, and I advise you to be discreet. If you are not, I shall take care that the world knows what you have done. I shall denounce myself, and, in doing so, denounce my charming fellow-conspirator.'

Cowed at last by his determination, and well aware that he would hesitate at nothing if it once became a case of open war, she had taken her departure on the evening when Mervyn Darrell was on the watch. Since then she had made no sign. But on the

morning after Woodville's adventure at the opera she came again.

Woodville sat writing at an *escritoire*, and the moment her eyes fell upon his face she was startled by its haggard expression and ghastly pallor. She closed the door softly behind her, and advanced smiling, with outstretched hand.

'My dear Woodville,' she said, 'I have come with a flag of truce! I was angry when we last met; but I am cooler now, and I wish to say, "Let bygones be bygones." After all, what is done cannot be undone, so let us shake hands.'

She took his hand in hers, and then sat down.

'After all,' she continued, with a cat-like purr, 'my matrimonial designs, as you called them, were unworthy of me, and I could never have settled down with that benevolent old imbecile. I am going to Vienna, to interview a circle there.'

'Alone?' asked Woodville, smiling.

‘The Count von Mozer—a charming man—will escort me. He is a believer, and fabulously rich,’ she replied, showing her white teeth and flashing her eyes.

‘I see — another conquest! Well, I wish you luck.’

‘But you, my dear Woodville, what will become of you? Shall you, like myself, become philosophical, and seek fresh fields of activity?’

‘I am returning to India,’ said Woodville quietly.

‘Cured, I hope, of your infatuation. My dear friend, oil and vinegar will never mix, and you and I have nothing in common with these cold English. I am sorry,’ she added, ‘to see you looking so ill.’

‘I am well enough,’ he answered.

‘Humph! What would you say to me if I gave you a piece of news? Miss Arlington is in London!’

‘I know that,’ replied Woodville.

‘You have seen her—you have met again?’

‘I have seen her, but we have not spoken,’ he said, rising and holding out his hand.

She laughed and said ‘Good-bye,’ tripping out of the room with the light step of a girl of seventeen. He turned to the window, and saw at the door an open carriage drawn by two fine horses. A liveried coachman sat on the box and a footman stood at the door, and in the carriage was seated a stout elderly gentleman with a white moustache.

‘The happy Count von Mozer!’ thought Woodville, as Madame Obnoskin entered the carriage and seated herself by the elderly gentleman’s side. As they drove off she looked up, nodded, and playfully kissed her hand.

For days after his meeting with Isabel, Philip Woodville remained like a man under a charm. He could do nothing and plan nothing, and he could think of nothing except Isabel. Under this enchantment, the

great City itself became transformed. His walks through the dark streets were no longer solitary; the thought of her was comfort and companionship. Again and again he asked himself: 'What is she doing now? Is she thinking of me? Is she conscious of the sympathy which seems to link us together, and am I forgiven?'

For two nights and days he fought against the influence which drew him towards the place which sheltered her. On the third night, unable to resist it any longer, he walked in the direction of Grosvenor Square.

Wandering out of Soho, and turning into Coventry Street, he mixed with the crowds returning from the theatres and with the idlers lingering along the pavement; crossed Piccadilly Circus, where the nightly saturnalia of painted women was beginning; pushed his way through the obscene throngs outside the St. James's Restaurant, and gained the quieter pave-

ments of Piccadilly. The rattle of innumerable cabs, the sound of voices, the flashing of the lamps in the street and the lamps of the moving vehicles, all seemed strange and afar off, like lights and sounds in a dream.

It was a fine night, but the skies overhead were covered with clouds, through which a stormy moon was sailing, now hidden, now seen, and casting flying gleams on the streets and housetops.

He turned out of Piccadilly, and followed the street which leads into Berkeley Square. All was quiet here, save for an occasional hansom driving by, and the foot passengers were very few. A few minutes later he reached Grosvenor Square.

Ignorant of the number of the Earl's residence, he walked quietly round the narrow pavement underneath the trees. The square was perfectly deserted, and there were few lights in the houses, for the season was almost completely over, and the fashionable exit

was in full swing. At long intervals a carriage would draw up at one of the houses, discharge its load of cloaked and hooded women and shirt-fronted men, and drive away again, leaving the deep silence deeper still. The leaves rustled gently overhead in the central garden, and now and then, when the autumnal breeze rocked their branches with greater force, a few of them flitted to the ground.

The season and the time of night were consonant with the feelings uppermost in Woodville's mind. The moist air, prophetic of coming rain, fanned his hot brow and soothed the tension of his nerves. As he strolled round and round under the murmuring leaves, he watched the windows in which a light still lingered. The wild passion, the mad desire of possession, had died out of his heart, he thought of her now always with a tender pity and remorse. Why had he obeyed the foolish impulse to follow her to England? It would have been so much better, so

much braver and tenderer in him to have accepted the decree of fate, to have beaten down his passion for her, and to have let her go away, to forget him.

‘She will forget me in time,’ he told himself, and found comfort in the thought; for he was purified, and the good in his nature, which for so many years he had sedulously suppressed, had asserted itself, and triumphed over the cynicism he had fostered. He could think of her, happy in the life-long society of another man, nursing his children, without any disturbing pang of jealousy. Self was forgotten, his only desire was for her happiness, his only sentiment pity for the tender heart he had bruised. He would never see her again, he knew, and that knowledge, which would have been the very quintessence of sorrow to him only so short a time before, had no power to stir him from his calm.

‘She will learn to forgive me,’ he told himself, ‘and then to forget me, and in a little time I shall be nothing

but a memory.' He bowed to his fate and accepted his sentence with quietude, almost with cheerfulness.

Three o'clock had struck, and still he wandered round and round the railings. The lights had died out from most of the windows of the square, and for the last half-hour the only sound which had broken its silence had been the measured tramp of the policeman as he paced upon his beat. The whirr of wheels and hum of voices came faintly from the great thoroughfares of Piccadilly and Oxford Street, deadened by the moist air. A carriage rounded the corner of a street leading into the square. Idly, Woodville watched its gleaming lights as they neared him, till they stopped before the door of one of the mansions. A footman descended from the box and roused the sleepy echoes with a thunderous summons on the knocker. The door of the house opened, and in the flood of crude light shed by the hall lamp, Woodville saw a well-known figure trip up the steps and

into the house. Lady Carlotta ! His breath came thick ; he advanced quickly into the horse road, as Lord Wanborough followed with a second female figure on his arm.

‘ Isabel ! ’ he breathed, scarcely above a whisper.

Was it fancy or reality ? The girl shrank nearer to the old man, and threw a quick glance behind her as she entered the house.

The door closed and the carriage rolled away.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LAST RESOLVE.

It was clear at last to Philip Woodville that there was only one way.

So far his sacrifice had been useless ; it had neither saved Isabel from the consequences of his sin, nor ensured his own moral redemption. *She* was still the slave of his evil power ; *he* was still the slave of his own overmastering passion. The inexorable laws of Nature, which he had ignored or defied, were exacting the full retribution for a broken commandment.

It is part of the mystery of existence that the punishment of sin does not end with the guilty : it extends to the innocent, even to the remotest generation ; and

this fact, though it has made many thinking men doubt the beneficence of God, often multiplies tenfold the sinner's sense of responsibility. Philip Woodville was no longer a casuist; he had escaped from the atmosphere of intellectual casuistry into the clearer air of spiritual insight. He understood, therefore, that Isabel, though wholly innocent of all blame, was reaping the harvest of *his* sin.

And so long as he *lived* she must suffer. The wicked magic of his hypnotism would continue to possess her, so long as he remained capable of thought and passion.

He might school himself to resignation, he might efface himself from her knowledge, he might fly to the furthest ends of the earth, but it would be all of no avail. Here, again, the charlatan was hoist with his own petard. He had played with things superhuman and supernatural, he had juggled with the machinery of Nature, and at last he had lived to

discover that these things were not chimeras, but terrible realities.

Now, his knowledge of hypnotism, altogether empirical, taught him that its influence was fundamentally a physical influence, dependent on the living body, the seat of the living will. With the death of the body, that influence ceased. In order to free Isabel Arlington, he had only to die.

Death had never had much terror for this man, for he had never been much in love with life, and he was not troubled with any misgivings about a hereafter. He determined, therefore, to complete his sacrifice without delay in the only way possible.

Having once made up his mind to this course, which was to be the solution of all his sorrow, he quietly and deliberately made his preparations. He completed the business which he had undertaken on behalf of others; and placed in the care of his bankers a brief will, which left such property as he

possessed to his Indian relations on the mother's side. He explained, as his reason for depositing the will, that he was going on a long and dangerous journey, from which he might never return.

All his worldly affairs being thus arranged, he deliberated for some time as to the method by which he would put an end to his existence.

If he committed suicide in the ordinary way, the usual vulgar formalities would be gone through over his dead body, and the horrible truth might be conveyed, by some accident or another, to Isabel. He would spare her this, as well as all other, sorrow. He would quietly disappear, and destroy himself in such a way as to leave no trace whatever.

He occupied many hours in destroying all such papers or articles of property as might tend to establish his identity. He then conveyed the greater part of his luggage to one of the great railway-stations, and left it in 'the cloak-room' to be called for.

Among all this luggage there was no article whatever which could furnish any clue to the owner. He retained only a small dressing-bag, which he proposed taking with him when he left London, and which (if his plan did not fail) would soon be lying, like himself, at the bottom of the ocean.

His plan was simple enough. He would go quietly on board one of the great sea-going steamers, pay for his passage under an assumed name, and then—well, the rest would be easy. On some stormy night, when there was confusion on board, a passenger would disappear into the darkness without being missed, and his fate would only be another of the many secrets of the sea.

It needed a stony heart and an iron will to carry out this programme, but these Woodville possessed. When everything was ready, he sat down to his desk and wrote the following words :

‘By the time you read these lines, if you ever read them, I shall have left England, never to return. After you have read them, please destroy them, and with them obliterate if you can all memory of one who has brought you so much sorrow.

‘It would be better, perhaps, if I went away without a word ; and even now, though I am writing out of the fulness of an over-burdened heart, though I cannot resist the impulse to set down my thoughts, I am not quite sure that I shall ever send you what is so written. Yet I want you to know, to realize, that evil as I am, I am not altogether evil ; that thanks to you, and to you only, I have risen out of the ashes of my dead self, and am another, perhaps a better, man.

‘My child—dare I call you *that*, and be forgiven ? It is strange, but now all is over, now my angry passions are hushed to sleep, now my last struggle with my baser nature is ended, I feel as if you were a

child only, for whom I had only felt a father's holy love. Though I am not yet old in years, I feel like a gray-haired man, blessing a dear little one whom he is never to see again.

‘Isabel, my child, you have brought me at least one thing—to believe in human goodness, in human purity and love. It has been a hard lesson, but I have learned it well. Do not think that I shall ever forget it! When my eyes close for ever, I shall die with that knowledge. If God is Goodness, if God is Purity and Love, then, for the first and last time, I believe in God.

‘This is *your* victory, my child. If there be any comfort to you in having converted a soul so worthless, may it comfort you.

‘But I must not leave you with a lie upon my lips, or what is the shadow of a lie. I still believe that, if there be a God, He is powerless to undo the sorrow of this world; I still believe that no Omnipotence could

have created evil ; I still believe that Death is silence and the end of all.

‘Alas ! I am preaching, where I meant only to pray. My prayer is for your forgiveness—better still, for your happiness, my child.

‘May all good spirits watch over you ! May all pure thoughts and gracious hopes sustain you ! May love and happiness dwell with you and bless you, now and until life is done.

‘PHILIP WOODVILLE.’

The letter written, he read it again and again without tears, but with a despair so deep, so absolute, as almost to dry up the fountain of all emotion. At last he folded it up and placed it in an envelope, which he carefully sealed and addressed to Miss Arlington, care of the Earl of Wanborough, Grosvenor Square.

Still hesitating whether or not to send the letter

at all, he placed it in his pocket-book, to await his final determination.

Two days afterwards Woodville called at the London office of the Peninsular and Oriental Steamship Company, and took an intermediate passage in one of the company's vessels, the *Semiramis*, which was to sail from Southampton next morning. He avoided engaging a berth in the saloon, lest he might stumble on any friend or acquaintance among the cabin passengers, and he gave the name which he had temporarily adopted, 'Mr. Phillips.'

He left by the night train for Southampton and went on board under cover of the darkness. Before leaving the shore, he posted the letter of adieu which he had written to Isabel.

Few would have recognised Philip Woodville in the sad, worn-looking man who stood almost alone, on the fore part of the vessel, in the dim gray light of

the following dawn. He was disguised to no little extent, moreover, by a short black beard, which he had suffered to grow during the past fortnight. Clad in a dark suit of blue serge, and wearing a soft low-crowned hat which was drawn well down over his forehead and partially concealed his face, he looked more like a foreign sailor than a man accustomed to mix in good society.

The deck was almost deserted, for a thin drizzly rain was falling. Clammy white vapours hung over the sea, which was deep inky black and glassy calm.

Leaning over the bulwarks, he watched the white shores of England disappearing in the mist. When they vanished altogether, his eyes grew dim, and something rose in his throat ; for with them vanished, swallowed up for ever, the one light that had shone upon his lonely life.

Although the sea was smooth, it was full of vague trouble and unrest. As the ship toiled up and down

the great mounds of waves it seemed like a living thing, and the throb of the engines was like the monotonous beating of its heart.

One of the hands, a grizzly seaman, who had just finished helping to wash and scrub the decks, came to the spot where Woodville stood, and hung over the bulwarks, looking down at the water. Then he glanced at Woodville, and said phlegmatically :

‘ There’ll be dirty weather afore long, sir.’

‘ Why do you think so?’

‘ Well, it ain’t what *I* thinks, neither,’ answered the man, squirting a mouthful of tobacco-juice into the water; ‘ it’s what the *sea* thinks. You ain’t a sailor, I suppose, sir, or maybe you’d know?’

He paused a moment reflectively, and then continued :

‘ The sea’s like a live critter, and knows long before any mortal man what kind o’ storm’s comin’. Sometimes, when it knows there’s going to be a capful o’

wind, or maybe half a fresh gale, it jumps about like a dog a-wagging its tail, and cocks up its head to the sky, like a dog to its master; but sometimes it tumbles about in a lump, and trembles, and feels afraid. Look at it now, sir! Though there ain't a breath blowin', it's shiverin' through and through. It knows dirty weather's comin'; and what's more, it tells the wessel, and the wessel gets kind o' narvous too. Just you watch her! She's like a chap in a cold perspiration, and there ain't a timber in her as don't shake!'

'Many passengers?' asked Woodville, smiling at the old man's explanation.

'Plenty on 'em aft,' was the reply. 'We don't see much on 'em for the first few days, for most on 'em keeps their berths unless the weather's extra fine. You see, many on 'em is heavy-hearted at leaving old England and their friends. Goin' far with us, sir?'

‘I’ve taken my passage to Bombay,’ said Woodville.

At that moment there was a call of ‘All hands aft!’ and he was left alone.

As he looked at the heaving waters, he realized more and more the meaning of the old man’s words. There was something sentient in their ominous unrest. He strained his eyes downward, trying to penetrate the glassy gloom, and there was a moan in his ears as of many stifled voices, while the ship seemed to answer with a troubled groan.

As the day advanced, the steerage and intermediate passengers began to creep on deck—men and women of all nationalities, soldiers, sailors, landsmen, little children, and shivering ayahs. Everyone seemed cheerless and depressed, like the weather; for heavy mists and clouds continued to hang over the sea, and there was no sign of the sun.

The dreary day passed, and evening came.

Like a man under sentence of death, Woodville watched for the night. Nothing had shaken his purpose—nothing was likely to shake it. He was only waiting for a favourable opportunity; then, quietly, silently, unseen, unheard, he would disappear over the vessel's side, and so return to the troubled elements from which he came.

Never for a moment did it occur to him that such a suicide might be evil; on the contrary, he justified it to his conscience as supremely sane and good. He felt no superstitious dread. He believed in nothing, hoped for nothing, prayed for nothing, beyond death.

Towards nightfall the old sailor's prophecy seemed likely to be fulfilled. The barometer fell suddenly, and shortly afterwards it began to blow great gusts from the north-west. The waves grew mountainous, broken from ridge to ridge with white breakers, and the trumpets of the storm began to blow.

From time to time the waves broke heavily on the vessel and deluged the decks, which were already wet with flying foam. With panting breath and straining sides, the *Semiramis* laboured heavily through the surging seas.

It had grown pitch-dark. Not a gleam was seen, save the lights of the vessel, rising and falling. The passengers had crowded below, and Woodville was the only one left on deck.

He leant over the bulwarks for one last look at the element which was to engulf him. Brave as he was, he felt at that moment a thrill of hopeless anguish, almost of fear. But if he was to carry out his terrible purpose that night, the time had surely come.

He had set his teeth together and clenched his hands, preparing to leap into the sea, when a hand was laid upon his arm, and, turning wildly, he saw the old sailor who had spoken to him in the morning.

He was wrapped from head to foot in oilskins, and carried a ship's lanthorn.

‘Best get below, sir,’ said the old man. ‘We’ll be battening down hatches soon, if this goes on. What did I tell ye?’ he added, with a grim chuckle. ‘It’s comin’ now, and no mistake.’

Woodville did not reply, but stood trembling, like a man just snatched from death—as, indeed, he had been. The old man raised the lanthorn, and flashed the light into his face.

‘Lord love ye!’ he cried, ‘you look as white as a ghost! Take my advice, and turn in. You’ll soon have enough o’ this.’

Forcing a laugh, Woodville turned away, and staggered, rather than walked, towards the after-part of the ship, as if he were making for his cabin; but instead of turning in, he made for the darkness amidships, under the hurricane deck. The vessel rolled and lurched under him so that he could scarcely keep

his feet. He was close under the hurricane deck, when a great sea struck the ship, and he was flung helplessly towards the bulwarks aft, where he stood soaked from head to foot, clinging to the main rigging.

He was nerving himself for a fresh effort, and looking wildly round to make sure that he was unobserved, when he was startled by a voice sounding out of the darkness close to him :

‘Isabel, are you there? Isabel!’

‘Yes, here I am,’ answered another voice, the sound of which caused his heart to cease beating and his brain to swim round and round.

‘Do come in,’ said the first voice.

‘I am coming, dear,’ was the reply ; ‘but I should love to stay here all night and watch the sea.’

Was he dreaming? Was it indeed Isabel who spoke? Had Destiny by some mysterious means brought her there?

Clinging to the bulwarks for support, and deep in the darkness, he crept slowly towards the spot whence the voices had come.

A few steps brought him within sight of the open door of one of the deck cabins, and standing in the doorway, her pale face dimly illumined by the light of the cabin lamp, and her eyes looking out eagerly on the tumultuous sea, was Isabel.

He had just time to catch a glimpse of her, and to recognise her, when she drew back into the cabin and closed the door.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GREAT WATERS.

By what miracle, Woodville asked himself, had Isabel come there? It seemed like enchantment, and for a long time he could not believe that it was real.

Were his wits wandering at last under the awful tension of his despair, and before the prospect of annihilation?

Dazed and stupefied, like a man who has seen an apparition, he remained in the darkness, clinging to the rigging, swept this way and that by the plunges of the storm-tossed ship, soaked from head to foot with foam and spray, thinking no more of death, but

thrilling through and through with a new and tumultuous sense of life.

At last, fain to convince himself that what he had seen and heard was no delusion, he released his hold of the rigging and crept towards the cabin door ; reaching which, he clung for support to the brass stanchions which were fixed on the cabin. Listening intently, he again heard the sound of voices—a whispered sound almost lost in the shrieking of the storm, but he clearly distinguished the voice of Isabel.

It was no dream, then—no illusion. Isabel was there !

Certain of this, conscious once more of her near presence, he forgot altogether the purpose which had brought him on shipboard. The warm blood coursed again through his veins, and a burthen seemed lifted from his soul. Fate, more potent than any human will, had decreed that they should again be thrown together. The hour of sacrifice and martyrdom had

passed; he was saved for one supreme joy, that of looking again in the face of the woman he loved.

It was something, moreover, to feel that they had been swept, by accident or miracle, out of the ordinary world of men and women, and into the great darkness where the elements were at strife—that they were lifted up, as it were, like Francesca and Paolo, and mysteriously brought together. Might not Fate, which had done so much already, eventually do more? Might he not again hold her in his arms, hear her sweet words of love, feel her kisses on his face, and know that even in death they could not be divided?

Meantime the storm was growing.

For two nights and days the tempest lasted, but the *Semiramis* crawled upon its way, like a bird with broken wings. On the second day and night all the passengers were kept below, and the hatches were battened down. From time to time it seemed to

those listening below as if the last crash had come, and the ship, rent open or crushed amidships, was about to founder; then wild shrieks would come from the darkness, and die away amid the roar of wind and sea.

Woodville had gone to his cabin, where he remained a prisoner, calmly awaiting the event. More than once, in the utter selfishness of love, he wished that the end might come, and that Isabel and he might perish together; but then he hated himself for the wish, and prayed, in deep contrition, that *she* might be spared.

On the third day the strength of the storm was broken. The sea still rolled mountains high, but the wind veered round the north and fell there to half a gale, with occasional hurricanes, squalls of sleet and hail.

The captain, after taking their bearings, went below to snatch a little hard-earned rest; he had been

on the bridge, with only a few minutes' respite, for forty-eight consecutive hours.

In the dim cold light of the afternoon a few straggling passengers began to creep on deck. Among them was Woodville, who went forward and leant over the forecastle bulwarks, watching the sea.

As he stood thus he was accosted by his former acquaintance, the grim old sailor who had prophesied the storm.

'All right now, sir?' asked Neptune, with a grin. 'I warn't far wrong, wur I, when I said as how the sea was afraid o' sutthin' coming? It's had its bellyful this time, anyhow, but I reckon we've seen the worst on it *this* bout.'

His attention was attracted at that moment by the figure of a man in a travelling-cap and a long ulster, who came lurching along the decks from the after-cabin, and who looked the picture of utter misery and desolation.

‘Hold up, sir!’ cried the sailor, catching him just as he seemed on the point of pitching head forward into the scuppers. ‘You’re out of your bearing, I fancy. Shall I help ’ee back to the saloon?’

‘Thank you,’ said a faint voice. ‘I came on deck for a little air, and——’

‘That’s all right,’ replied Neptune, still supporting him. ‘It’s more airier forward, as you say. Sit down here, sir, and I’ll get ye a tarpaulin to wrap round your legs.’

So saying, he deposited the passenger on a seat close to the fore cabin, and ran off to fetch the tarpaulin. The passenger groaned dolefully, and Woodville, for the first time, looked round.

He recognised the passenger in a moment. It was Mervyn Darrell. Their eyes met, and he saw in a moment that he, too, was recognised.

‘Good heavens!’ gasped Mervyn. ‘Is it possible?’

Woodville motioned him to silence as the sailor came up with the tarpaulin and wrapped it round his legs.

‘Shall I get ye anything? Ye look as if a drop of summat would do ye good!’

‘I have been exceedingly unwell,’ answered Mervyn. ‘I am an excellent sailor, as a rule, but the cabin was like the Black Hole of Calcutta. If you could get me a little brandy I should feel obliged.’

The sailor nodded approvingly, and walked off to the cabin. Then Mervyn looked again at Woodville, as if deeply perplexed.

‘You quite startled me, Mr. Woodville,’ he said. ‘Am I to understand that you knew we were here, that you have followed us from England, that——’

‘I knew Miss Arlington was on board,’ interrupted Woodville. ‘I knew it two nights ago. My own presence is purely accidental. I am returning to Bombay.’

‘ And Miss Arlington is going to Aden to meet her father, who is on his way home. She was far from well, you will be sorry to hear, and I—well, as you see, I am in attendance,’ he added nervously, looking at Woodville with a helpless expression. ‘ Really, this is most unfortunate !’

‘ We must make the best of the inevitable,’ replied Woodville. ‘ There is no necessity whatever that Miss Arlington should know that I am so near her—it is far better, indeed, that she should never know.’

‘ Quite so,’ murmured Mervyn.

‘ She is well, I trust ? She has not suffered much during the storm ?’

‘ To be quite candid, I really don’t know—I’ve been suffering so dreadfully myself. But I *think* she’s all right—indeed, Lady Carlotta says so. For myself, I feel humiliated, degraded. Sea-sickness is so un-beautiful !’

Here Neptune brought the brandy, which Mervyn drank at once.

‘Where are we now, my good man?’ he asked.

‘Somewheres near the Bay o’ Biscay,’ replied the sailor.

‘A dreadful place, I have heard, where it is always blowing. Ah, well, I suppose there is no longer any danger?’

The sailor shook his head with a grin, and then walked away.

‘My dear Woodville,’ said Mervyn, after a pause, leaning his head against the cabin and rocking up and down with the motion of the ship, ‘this meeting, extraordinary as it is, is only an instance of what a contemporary writer calls the long arm of coincidence. Seen philosophically, however, everything is coincidence; without it evolution would be impossible.’

‘You will keep my secret?’ demanded Woodville—
‘from Miss Arlington, I mean?’

‘Certainly. The knowledge, I am afraid, would only distress her. She has a sincere regard for you, my dear Woodville, and is quite superior, as you know, to the usual prejudices of her sex ; but, of course, under all the circumstances——’

He did not complete the sentence, but sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

Later in the afternoon, when Mervyn returned to the saloon, it was quite understood between the two men that Isabel should be kept in complete ignorance of Woodville’s presence in the ship. Mervyn promised to say nothing, and Woodville, on his part, undertook to keep to his cabin as much as possible, and never, at any time, to approach the saloon part of the vessel.

It would have been strange indeed, in view of the subtle influence which Woodville had exercised over her life, if Isabel had been altogether unaffected by the near presence of one who was thinking of

her so continually. That same evening, when the storm was well over, she ventured out on the after-deck, whither Lottie presently followed her, and found her sitting alone, with that strange far-off look in her eyes which she had so often dreaded.

‘What is the matter, dear?’ asked Lottie, sitting by her side and taking her hand.

‘Listen!’ said Isabel, trembling.

‘I can hear nothing except the waves breaking and that horrible wind whistling. What is that you think you hear?’

‘I’m sure it is no fancy, I have heard it so often,’ answered Isabel, as if to herself. ‘Always when the wind falls for a moment I seem to hear a voice calling my name. All through the storm I heard it crying, and once, last night, I saw something like a hand beckoning.’

‘Of course, it is only your fancy,’ said the prac-

tical Lottie. 'You're nervous—and no wonder! The weather has been simply awful!'

Isabel leant back with a sigh, closing her eyes. Suddenly she started, listened again, and rose to her feet, gazing intently towards the bows of the vessel. Then, as if sleep-walking, she began moving slowly in that direction.

'Isabel!' cried Lottie, embracing her and holding her back.

'He is calling me!' sighed the girl, with a vacant look. 'Let me go to him! let me go to him!'

'She is not well,' said Lottie to Mervyn, who came up at that moment. 'Help me to take her back to the cabin.'

They led her softly back, and she made no resistance, though she still seemed conscious of some influence apart from theirs. When they reached the small deck-cabin she sank on the seat with a low cry,

and began hysterically sobbing. Presently, however, she became quite calm.

‘Forgive me,’ she said, smiling faintly up at Lottie. ‘I’m better now; but I thought—I thought——’

The end of the sentence died away unspoken in a gush of tears.

Mervyn beckoned Lottie out of the cabin, and told her in whispers what had occurred that afternoon.

‘Here—on board the ship!’ cried Lottie, aghast.

‘Quite by accident, he says. He is returning to India. But he has promised me faithfully not to approach her, or to let her know.’

‘But she does know!’ said Lottie, in despair. ‘He is bewitching her still, as he bewitched her on land. He is a demon, a wizard, or something equally diabolical, and it is a wonder he hasn’t sent the ship to the bottom of the sea!’

She decided, nevertheless, not to breathe one word of the truth to Isabel.

As the night advanced the wind fell still more, and a bright, cold moon rose over the western horizon and shone upon the sea. As it climbed higher and higher into the heavens, it seemed to still the water with its rays, as with the touch of an enchanter's wand. All grew hushed and peaceful. The only sound that broke the silence was the monotonous throb of the engines, and even this seemed subdued as the ship stole swiftly on.

Soon after midnight the moon had ceased to shine, and deep darkness enveloped sea and land. Presently the shrill shriek of the fog-horn broke the silence, and was repeated again and again at intervals. The ship was surrounded on every side by a thick mist.

The engines went at half-speed, the look-outs were doubled, and the ship crept slowly through the darkness, as if groping her way.

Lottie had been asleep for some hours, when she

suddenly awakened, and saw Isabel standing in the centre of the cabin. Her eyes were wide open, but Lottie saw in a moment that she was fast asleep.

Slowly and silently she moved towards the cabin door, and was about to open it and pass out, when Lottie sprang from her berth and gently drew her back. She hesitated and trembled, endeavouring to set herself free.

‘Let me go! Do you not hear him calling me?’ she whispered. And then cried eagerly, reaching out her hands:

‘Philip! Philip!’

At that moment the fog-horn shrieked loudly, and was answered by the loud shriek of human voices. There was a roar, a crash, and the ship shook through and through, as if a thunderbolt had rent it asunder.

Isabel awoke screaming, and clung to Lottie. The

shriek of voices was repeated ; then over it all rose the captain's loud voice of command, followed by the sound of feet rushing along the decks. The monotonous pulsation of the cylinders now ceased ; the engines had stopped.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LAST LOOK.

LOTTIE opened the cabin door and peered out into the night.

At first she could see nothing, for it was pitch-dark; then, raising her eyes, she saw near to her and close to the bridge something like a dense black cloud, and above it a great ball of light.

The great hull and masthead-light of another ship!

Lottie understood at a glance what had happened. The strange ship, a steamer also, had collided with the *Semiramis* in the darkness, smiting her almost amidships with savage force, and cutting into her

steel sides like a jagged knife. Its own bows were shattered with the shock, and there, like a great living monster clutching its prey, it clung on, quivering through and through convulsively, and vomiting clouds of black smoke into the air.

Meantime the tumult of disaster had begun. From both ships rose the cry of seamen, the shrieks of passengers crowding the decks, mingled with the roaring of water, the hiss of escaping steam, the crashing and rending of planks and masts. Lights moved here and there in the strange ship, and from time to time there was a ghastly flash from the engine fires.

Horried by what she saw, Lottie fell back and almost swooned away.

And now a strange metamorphosis occurred in the two girls. The delicate and nervous Isabel, sensitive as a leaf to every nervous impression, became cool and collected in face of their great peril, while

Lottie, for the first time in her life, was hysterical with fear.

Amid the deafening din around them, they dressed rapidly, and prepared to leave the cabin, when there was a sharp knock at the door.

‘You must dress at once!’ cried the voice of Mervyn. ‘We may have to leave the ship.’

At that moment an order was given in the strange ship to reverse the engines, and, quivering through and through with the slow strokes of the propeller, she began to back away. As her cut-water was drawn out like a jagged knife from the wounded sides of the *Semiramis*, the waves rushed in with a dull roar, and the stricken vessel heaved over as if about to sink, while her funnel-stays and rigging, clinging like fingers to the bows of the other vessel, were cut away with axes to set her free.

Slowly the black hull receded, and the *Semiramis* heeled over to the water-line and floated helplessly

on the black waves. When she was about fifty yards away, the strange vessel stood stationary, letting off steam. She was a great iron steamship, several thousand tons bigger than the *Semiramis*, and her black hull towered far above the water-line, as if she was in ballast.

Rocket signals were now rapidly exchanged between the two ships, the stranger intimating that she would stand by until daybreak, and send assistance if necessary. The clamour was now hushed. The captain and chief engineer had gone below to ascertain the extent of the damage done. The passengers crowded the decks and waited in terror, while the crew gathered amidships, and whispered together.

The darkness was now partially broken by the dim ghostly gleam of the coming dawn. Dark clouds of vapour still hung over the sea, but between them crept feeble shafts of light, falling coldly on the heaving black waters of the sea. The figures of men

were now clearly visible on the strange ship, crowding in the bows and gazing towards the *Semiramis*. Above the water-line of the hull was a great jagged gap or wound, where the iron bows had been torn open by the force of the collision.

The captain and engineer now emerged from the hold of the *Semiramis*, and orders were immediately given to ‘man the pumps.’ This was done, and after a little time the men seemed to gain on the water, and the ship seemed to float more buoyantly. It had been found impossible, however, to ascertain the exact extent of the damage.

The great ship looked like a wreck. One of the funnels had toppled over, crushing in its fall two of the boats, and splitting open the hurricane deck. The mainmast had gone by the board, swinging by the shrouds and stays until they cut it away. That the worst was still apprehended was evident from the

fact that a portion of the men were piped away to prepare the remaining boats.

Pale as death, but still quite calm and collected, Isabel stood close to the cabin door, gazing at the scene of disaster and desolation. Lottie had sunk in a seat, hiding her face in her hands.

‘I knew it!’ she cried, clinging to Mervyn, who was trying in vain to console her. ‘I knew it from the moment you told me that that man was on board!’

Isabel did not seem to hear the words. Her eyes had fallen on the man himself, who suddenly rose before her. He was bareheaded, his face was grimed with smoke and soot, he had thrown off his coat and waistcoat to work at the pumps, and stood in his shirt sleeves, but she knew him in a moment, and uttered a low cry of recognition.

‘There is a chance for the ship yet,’ he said quickly without pausing to give any explanation of his

presence ; ‘and in any case, *you* will be quite safe.’

At the sound of his voice, she tottered and seemed about to fall. He caught her in his arms.

‘Courage, Miss Arlington!’ he cried.

She released herself gently, and, looking into his face, gave him her hand. The action was so sweet, so gentle, that his heart overflowed with love and gratitude.

‘How strange that we should meet,’ she said ; ‘and yet—I *thought* that you were near—I have thought it ever since we left land—and I am glad, very glad, to find it true.’

‘Stand by the boats!’ cried the captain’s voice from above them. ‘Make ready to lower away!’

‘Aye, aye, sir!’ came the answer from below.

A wild cry came from the passengers crowding the fore part of the vessel :

‘She’s sinking! God help us!’

‘Silence there!’ cried the captain’s voice again. ‘She’s floating yet, and may float for hours. Silence those lubbers forward,’ he continued, ‘and pass the word round to women and children.’

A heavy tremor ran through and through the ship, and she rolled on the black waves like a thing in pain.

There was a tumult forward as the passengers made for the boats which had been lowered; then a shriek of agony, as one of the boats, swamped with its sudden load, heeled over and sank.

‘Come!’ cried Woodville, placing his arm round Isabel and hurrying her forward; then, turning to Mervyn, he added, ‘Bring Lady Carlotta!’

The bulwarks were open forward, and the long boat, manned, and already half filled, was rocking wildly alongside. As the crowd of panic-stricken passengers crushed forward, the captain faced them revolver in hand.

‘The women and children first,’ he said. ‘I’ll shoot the first man that comes this way!’

One by one the children and women were lifted forward, and dropped into the boat, till it was crowded with moaning creatures.

‘Push off!’ cried the captain, and the long boat, loaded almost to the water’s edge, was rowed away.

A second boat took its place. There was another rush of the terrified passengers, and again the captain kept the men back.

All this time Woodville had been vainly trying to force his way through the crowd. Suddenly Isabel held him back.

‘Philip,’ she whispered, clinging to him.

‘Yes?’

‘Let us stay here! I do not wish to live. Let us die together!’

He looked at her in wonder. Her face was smiling,

her eyes were full of deep and unutterable love. With a sob he drew her to his bosom, and kissed her on the forehead. No one looked at or heeded them. Every soul there was struggling towards the boats, and praying to be spared from death.

‘No, my darling,’ he whispered, ‘you will live. But God bless you for your love ! You have made me very happy !’

The last boat was rocking at the vessel’s side, and it was nearly full of men.

‘Make way there !’ cried Woodville, struggling forward.

The captain saw him approaching with Isabel in his arms, and waved back the men who were crowding to the boat.

‘This way, sir !’ he cried. ‘Room there !’

In another moment Woodville had placed her in the captain’s arms, and she was helped down into the boat. Woodville then turned, and handed forward

Lady Carlotta. Mervyn sprang down after her, and some half dozen men followed. A few still remained, and tried to follow, but the captain pushed them fiercely back, as the boat was already dangerously full.

‘Away with you, lads! Quick, for God’s sake!’

The last boat left the vessel’s side.

Some dozen passengers, several of the engineers and crew, and the old captain, now remained with Woodville on the *Semiramis*. There was a chance of rescue yet, for the other ship was launching its boats to come to their assistance.

It was now broad daylight.

Leaning against the foremast with folded arms, Philip Woodville quietly watched the last boat rising and falling on the black waves, and he could see distinctly the form of Isabel, standing up and gazing towards him.

‘Philip, Philip!’ she cried.

He heard the cry, and murmured her name in answer. As he did so, he felt the decks sinking beneath him, and knew that the ship was going down.

A minute afterwards no sign of her remained upon the lonely waters; she had sunk like lead, drawing all on board with her in the whirlpool of her descent.

The ship's boats still floated on the sea, and from one of them rose again that cry of passionate farewell :

‘ Philip ! Philip ! ’

THE END.

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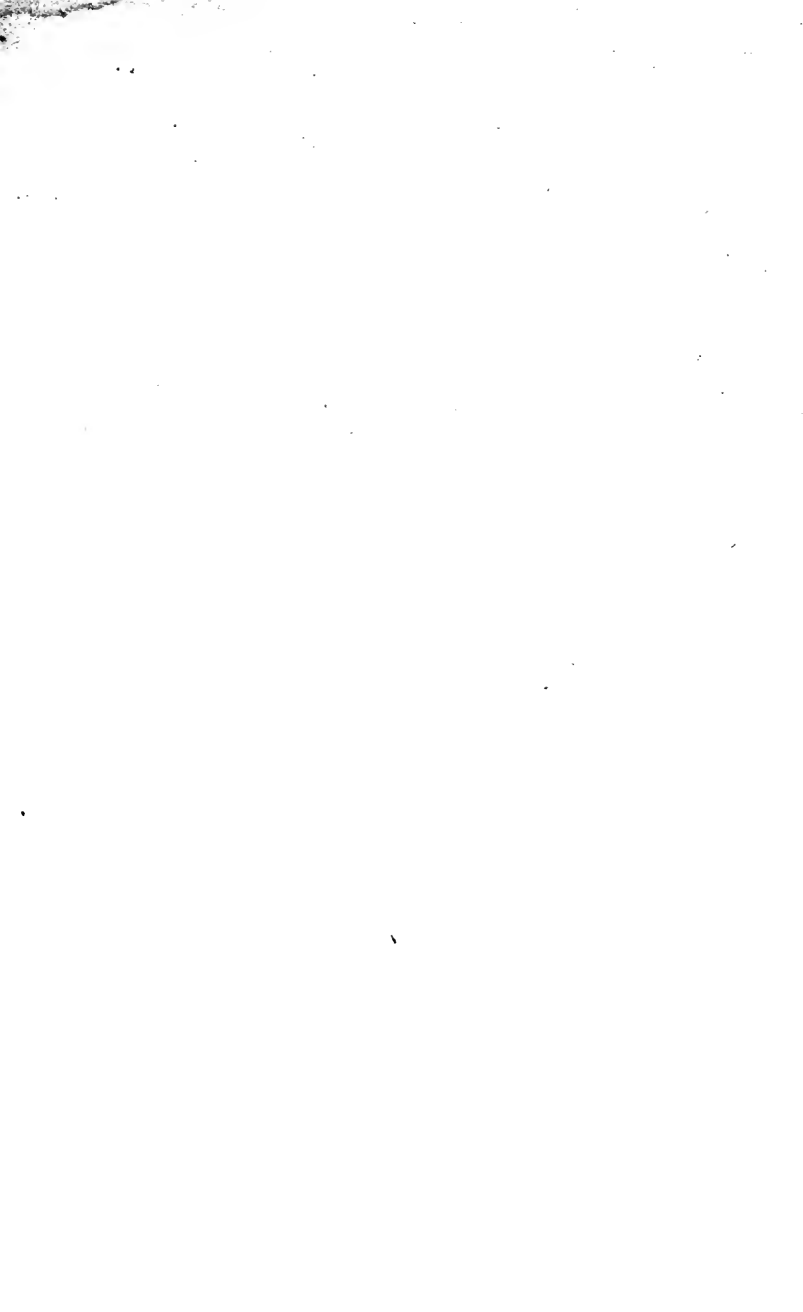
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